

BICYCLE THIEVES



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MY NEW BICYCLE WAS LOST YESTERDAY—STOLEN almost from under my nose as I was about to enter a cobbler's shop. The most logical place to look for it is here in the Piazza del Monte, in the neighbourhood of the Campo de' Fiori, the haven of the thieves of Rome, now a hundred times more numerous than in the past. Here, in the Via dei Baullari, the Via dei Coronari, the Vicolo del Cinque, they have their dives, hotels, bordellos, bars, and shops.

I had been looking unsuccessfully for black shoe polish in the shops of the Via della Scrofa; then in the Piazza Navona I had the unfortunate idea of asking a vegetable huckster where I could buy some. He suggested the Via dei Baullari. I had a feeling that I ought not to go, but I went because I needed it and was in a hurry. In reply to my question about the shoe polish, the wretched shopkeeper from behind his counter said he did have some; but he objected to my asking him from the door.

'Come in. Do you expect me to bring it to you out there?'

And so, leaning my bicycle against the shop window, I had gone in.

I had hardly taken two steps into the shop when a face appeared at the street window. Its owner was examining the bicycle, apparently in order to make certain that it was not padlocked. I had scarcely time to say to the shopkeeper, 'Wait a moment—I don't like that face!' when the thief, an unhealthy-looking young man, shabbily dressed, tieless, head shaven with mule clippers prison-style, grabbed the bicycle, mounted it, and pedalled furiously away.

'My bicycle's stolen!' I shouted, and started to run after him.

But two or three people, his accomplices, stood in front of me blocking my way. They assured me that he would be caught, and one of them even shouted:

'They've got him! They've got him!'

It was not true. The thief, on my bicycle, followed by two of his friends who pretended to pursue him, was pedalling towards the Corso Vittorio Emanuele. I went on shouting:

'Stop, thief!'

But no one stopped him. Instead, two or three cyclists, fellow thieves, pretended to pursue him. A crowd of people passing by made way for them. I shouted as long as I could. One of the dealers of

stolen goods, or one of his friends, started to run after another cyclist. He caught up with him, made him stop, and led him toward me.

'Is this your bicycle?' asked the dealer.

It was not mine, but I was unable to question the man closely because he pretended to be offended and began to protest; and so I was obliged to let him go about his business. If there had been a guard in sight along the Corso, one of the old communal guards, I should not have let him go. But in these terrible days of anarchy, where could one find a policeman? Others who had gathered around me advised me to go to the police station. They were either simpletons or thieves, because I knew from experience that for more than a year it had been useless to expect anything from the police, and that it was even more useless and a great waste of time to present a written report of a theft. You are lucky if the police don't make you look like a fool. As for helping you find the culprit as is their duty, they either answer:

'We have so many thieves to look for! The Regina prison is full of them! What do you want us to do? This is your lookout.' Or:

'We'll do the best we can. In the meantime, leave us your telephone number.'

A waste of time, for you may be sure that no policeman will look for your bicycle or for the thief.

Whoever stole my bicycle, my beautiful, light,

aluminium bicycle, weighing only five kilos, equipped with almost-new tyres, barely patched inner tubes, the front one with one patch, the rear one with two, with racing handlebars, a basket, and an aluminium pump, must have been a young criminal recently released from the Regina prison or probably one who had escaped the other day during the uproar caused by a fire in one of the wings of the prison, I forget which. He probably decided that the only thing left for him to do was to start stealing again. And he robbed me with classic impudence. He was not afraid of a crowd, and he had the job organized to perfection. Others gathered round to advise me to do what I should have done in the first place: go at once to the Piazza del Monte, the principal hiding place for thieves, the chief market for every kind of stolen goods.

The square is crowded from morning until night, so much so that it is impossible to move except with the greatest difficulty—crowded with thieves of every class and kind, who steal every object imaginable: yard goods, leggings, shoes, lamps and cords, even tooth-brushes and perfumes, razors and razor blades, inner tubes and patches, clocks, and, above all, bicycles. If, on the one hand, the stores of the Via delle Colonnate, the Piazza Quadrata, the Piazza Fiume (the so-called Lazzaretti), the Piazza Vittorio Emanuele, were at one time glutted with bicycles and are now literally stripped of them, on the other hand it is now the Piazza del Monte that is glutted with gleaming new bicycles, as

well as old and broken-down ones. Here can be found shiny new Bianchis with lamp brackets, the latest model. For the lamp alone they ask three thousand lire. A twenty-eight and three-quarters tyre sells for twenty-nine hundred lire, and a twenty-eight and five-eighths tyre sells for thirty-two hundred lire. An inner tube, which is later found to have been patched, sells for sixteen hundred lire. Here can be seen thieves who carry, bandoleer-fashion, bundles of inner tubes and quantities of tyres. Others have spread dirty blankets on the ground at the far end of the Piazzetta, and on top of them display parts of stolen and dismantled bicycles, for the first thing that is done to a bicycle is to dismantle or camouflage it.

Bicycles are dismantled if their parts are thought to be identifiable—those, for example, which have old frames with new wheels, unusual handlebars, special paint, and no serial numbers. The parts are then sold one by one: to-day the handlebars, to-morrow the wheels, the day after to-morrow the pedals, then the lamp. Sometimes even the lamp is taken apart, and the dynamo and the lamp sold separately. But if the bicycles are almost new and without scratches they are camouflaged instead and the registration marks are filed off. Or it may be enough to remove the mudguards or change the brakes or the handlebars in order to make the bicycle unrecognizable. As for the thieves themselves, some are well dressed, some are not. A badly dressed one is more noticeable. This type of potential

jailbird can often be seen lounging, his rump resting on the bar of a bicycle, a bicycle which is ten times, a hundred times, the worth of the shady character who leans against it.

I prefer to observe the well dressed ones, men who don't look like thieves. They look like government workers or, at the worst, young salesmen, young messengers, with their hair freshly cut and plastered down, wearing a flashy, well-laundered shirt, a wrist watch and American-style shoes. For the most part their eyes are greyish, and their noses broad and flat. I have a special gift for telling from a person's appearance what he is or what he thinks. Nevertheless, there are thieves who are so well dressed and so respectable in appearance that even I am fooled. And not only I, but other thieves as well, for every thief doesn't necessarily know all the others, nor do the *habitués* of the Piazza del Monte form a single gang. As a matter of fact, there are several gangs—the bordello group, for instance, in the neighbourhood of the Via del Panico.

Only a short time ago, before the Anglo-Americans who in deference to their puritanical customs had all the houses of prostitution in Rome closed, you could have found this gang in two bordellos of the Via del Teatro della Pace. There, during the early hours of the morning, you would have found those creatures who spend the night with harlots and remain until dawn in dirty beds, trampled by the shoes of so

many day and evening customers. They get up while the whore still sleeps, with a trickle of saliva drooling from her disgusting mouth, which stinks of tobacco, wine, and sensuality. But the man, awake between the hours of six and seven, is planning a theft. He then leaves the bordello, flashily dressed, hair plastered down, to arrange for the next job or to sell in the Piazza del Monte the booty of the last one. This is the type of good-for-nothing who, although old enough to take a wife, raise a family, set up shop, has never given any thought to doing so. He has grown up in the back alleys of Rome, as nettles or dandelions grow in cemeteries or crabgrass and weeds grow on country lanes. Nor have his kind ever stopped to think how much less tiresome it is to do an honest day's work. They never think of the effort involved in their shady dealings as being work. To stay in the Piazza del Paradiso near the Campo de' Fiori, waiting for the signal from their confederates, rolling cigarettes between their fingers—to them this is not tiring nor, I suppose, really hard work. It is mean work, but it is work of sorts.

For me this kind of job would be tedious and unbearable. I should prefer to stay at a desk for six straight hours without lifting my pen from paper than spend a boring quarter of an hour in the rôle of go-between. But they rather like this sort of life. They show indifference and pretend to be busy in order not to attract the attention of the passers-by. But for them the

best part—and for us the blackest side of a dark picture—is the fact that honest folk, the bourgeois who pass by or shop in the streets of thieves, tolerate them and let them rob their neighbours, and sometimes cover up for them. Ask anyone—a restaurant keeper, let's say, for restaurant keepers know them all. They both fear them, which is understandable, and countenance them, which is unpardonable. I am forced to the conclusion that barbers, restaurant keepers and shopkeepers—some, not all—feel a certain sympathy, a certain sense of kinship, even affection, for thieves. However, remember that the first Romans were nothing but thieves, abductors of Sabine women, likeable perhaps, but thieves nonetheless. But that is another story. Some day I shall write a history of Rome myself, a true and humorous one. But to come back to the unheard-of, unbelievable solidarity which the thieves of Rome always have enjoyed and still enjoy, one thing is sure: that after having lost your bicycle, or I should say after having been robbed of your metal and rubber steed, if you beat your breast and tear your hair and wail aloud, carters, automobile drivers, innkeepers, shopkeepers, barbers will laugh at you. If you don't disappear quickly, they will make fun of you and become overbearing and insulting. You'll be lucky if you get off with nothing more than a few uncomplimentary epithets.

Meantime the poor thief jokes and jests, untouched by his victim's lamentations, revelling in the memory

of his deed: 'the dear thief,' as Verlaine used to say.

Verlaine liked thieves. He liked them because he had been in prison with them, and called them 'dear thieves.' He called murderers 'sweet murderers'; but this was perhaps just a matter of rhyming—at most, a mere question of words, a poet's pleasant words which are as nothing in the naked reality of things. As for me, if in order to be a poet I had to be a pederast or become an alcoholic, I'd rather be, at least so far as thieves are concerned, nothing but a good policeman: a patient and persistent policeman, one who likes to discuss poetry, not like Verlaine's, but poetry whose subject matter is the tracking down of thieves and an honest man's contempt for them. It is plain that Verlaine, when he was consorting with the 'dear thieves' of Mons, did not yet know how to ride a bicycle. But, as there is a caricature of Verlaine where the poet pictures himself as a cyclist, I should like to believe that in his time either there were not so many thieves in Arles as there are in Rome to-day in the Piazza del Monte alone, or that in those days, a hundred years or so ago, thieves had some respect or pity for poets. A poet such as I needs a bicycle as he needs bread; and if bread serves to nourish him, so the bicycle represents for him another kind of bread, the bread of spiritual good. That spiritual good, which I have already experienced, is attained only after the city has been left at least a dozen kilometres behind, far beyond the outskirts of the

suburbs. So I have great need for a bicycle in order to lose myself, to escape, to get away from human society.

How, for example, could I forget the scene which I witnessed this morning in the Piazza del Monte? Suddenly, among the thieves who sold tyres and inner tubes, there appeared an elegant young man. His build was as magnificent as a guardsman's. I have never looked at men from the viewpoint of physical beauty, and yet he was as pleasing to my eyes as a Greek statue. He was like one of the Phidian horsemen of the Parthenon frieze. His hair, which was wavy, was not the raven hair of the inhabitants of the Trastevere or of Parione, but chestnut-coloured, like that of movie stars. His eyes were the light colour of troubled waters, with reflections of deep amber. He seemed an Adonis-like image of physical beauty and I, looking at him, thought with melancholy of my own youth, now past, when I had been as handsome as he. So I observed him with sympathy and with considerable curiosity. He was wearing, like a film star, a brown zippered shirt made of silk or of fine wool jersey, and long trousers, faultlessly creased and tailored—enough to turn the head of any young stenographer. I decided that he was a well-known movie actor. But I do not keep up with movie actors, for I am not much interested in the movies. I look upon cinematography as a vulgar art which, because of its very nature, will never be able to detach itself from the commonplace. I don't even

know what any woman knows—the names or the activities of our principal stars.

While I was talking to myself, the young man bought two tyres. The thief, who was also the vendor, asked him three thousand lire apiece. The handsome young man carefully examined, both inside and out, the articles that he was purchasing. Then, with a grandiose gesture, he took from the hip pocket which well-dressed men affect a leather wallet, the open kind, of antelope skin. I had never seen one like it in these terrible times of hunger and unrest, nor shall I ever see one more handsome, even if better times return. The wallet bulged with five-hundred-lire notes, the rose-coloured notes which from a distance look like slices of pink sausage—but this is beside the point. It did not detract from the beauty of the young man, nor from the extreme elegance of his fingers, which were neither thick nor effeminate. He took from the wallet a wad of notes, and counted out eleven of them. He became confused and annoyed in counting the ten-lire notes, so confused that while he was counting he announced, in a loud voice, that he would have to count the small bills over again. He motioned to the thief to put the eleven five-hundred-lire notes in his pocket—which the latter, with trembling hands, lost no time in doing. The good-looking young man finally succeeded in counting the remaining five hundred lire in small bills. He placed the two tyres across his shoulders, mounted a handsome aluminium bicycle, and rode off.

I stayed to watch the tyre seller and noted that, in less than ten minutes, he had sold another pair to a cheerful-looking individual who was either from Ariccia or from Frascati. Rubicund, elderly, with stringy white hair, he was, I am sure, a crooked restaurant keeper. He paid with tired-looking thousand-lire notes, the coffee- or chocolate-coloured ones, and received a pink-sausage-coloured five-hundred-lire note in change. Then he went on his way, and I continued to watch the sale of tyres. The location was a good one. From where I stood in the little square I could take it almost all in. Perhaps—the thought was a joyful one—my bicycle thief would put in an appearance with or without the bicycle.

I was lost in these thoughts when the restaurant keeper reappeared waving his arms, the five-hundred-lire note crumpled in his right hand, the very note that he had received a short while ago in change from the tyre vendor.

‘It’s a counterfeit! It’s a counterfeit!’ he shouted. ‘You gave me a counterfeit bill!’

‘Counterfeit?’

‘Yes, counterfeit! You gave it to me a little while ago. I noticed right away that it was counterfeit!’

‘Do you remember who gave it to you?’ The vendor seemed disturbed. ‘How do I know who gave it to you? Where were you? I gave you no change. I didn’t sell you anything.’

‘What do you mean, you didn’t sell me anything?’

shouted the restaurant keeper, furious. And the two of them started to hurl invectives at each other in true Roman style.

In the end the restaurant keeper cagily suggested that the thief look carefully in his wallet to see if by any chance there were not some other five-hundred-lire bills, just as crudely counterfeit.

I asked if I might examine the bill. I too had been robbed, but these thieves knew me. They had seen me hundreds of times sketching in the Piazza Navona and had also seen me wandering through their alleys in search of models—picaresque models, gypsy models, notorious models, bacchantes, young whores; I don't yet know why they cast a spell upon me, for in the flesh they often repel me, nor do I know how I managed to picture them as nymphs and to carry them into my world of fantasies which appear as real—of a reality that does not exist—as their transformation from vulgar beings appears to be real.

The thief and the restaurant keeper with one accord gave me the five-hundred-lire note to examine. It was an imitation little better than the copies of bills that are printed on one side only and advertise Banfi Starch. Certainly it had been copied by means of a crude heliogravure and had been so badly printed that the symbols, the so-called identification marks, did not tally, which pointed to the fact that it not only was counterfeit but had been printed in a great hurry. Seen against the light, the design showed not a figure but a

half-monster. It was a half-monster without lights and shadows and was crudely stamped, showing only the black outline of the features.

I agreed that the bill was counterfeit. Several pick-pockets who in the meantime had gathered around us confirmed with knowing whistles that the bill was a pretty poor job, an obvious forgery. And now they all laughed, both thieves and honest men. Only I remained to do more than laugh and to see how the scene would terminate. It ended by the unfortunate tyre vendor taking his greasy wallet from his vest with a hand that trembled violently and showing the ten five-hundred-lire notes which he still had: the very ones he had received from the young Adonis, the well-dressed super-thief who looked like the Phidian horseman, the thief of thieves.

'It doesn't matter!' retorted the victim to the gibes and jokes of his fellow thieves. 'Someone gave them to me, and someone else will take them back. For me they are all alike!'

He meant to say that any bills he had, good or bad, real or counterfeit, had all been acquired dishonestly.

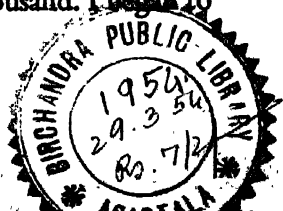
'Even the good ones are counterfeit: they are worth nothing!' he sighed philosophically. His sigh lasted but a fraction of a second; and after taking back the counterfeit bill, giving in exchange a good five-hundred-lire note, he continued to sell stolen tyres, taking care, however, to give as change the forged bills to those who were in more of a hurry than the

restaurant man, or who lived too far to come back and make a fuss about it.

On the second day I thought of going to the Porta Portese, because that is the biggest of the thieves' hang-outs. It was early when I got up, about six-thirty. It was one of the most beautiful days at the end of September, the most beautiful month in Rome, the clearest, bluest, and freshest. I left my house wearing a disguise, for I had noted that the day before too many *habitués* of the Piazza del Monte had observed my respectable appearance, my modest way of dressing, and my general look of competence. I wore neither collar nor tie, but around my neck I wrapped a scarf of Scotch wool and knotted it in the manner affected by thieves. I chose from among my shoes a pair that had once been very handsome but, through long usage, had been worn through and patched up. However, I did not delude myself that I looked like a real thief. Actually, my disguise only served to arouse the curiosity of the inquisitive porter of the house where I lived in the Via Oslavia. Before my bicycle had been stolen I had had two—which was lucky, for owning two is indispensable in attempting to recover the one that has been stolen. So on the second bicycle I went from the Prati Quarter along the bank of the Tiber, through the Lungara, then across the Ponte Garibaldi to the Viale del Re, turned at the top by the Ministry of Instruction and went left through the Via Portuense,

to the Reformatory, and from there to the Porta Portese. Going through St. Peter's Square, I had noted the beauty of the immense rose and blue shell-like dome emerging from the sea of Christianity. I had crossed half of a silent Rome, for the city goes to bed early and does not get up until eight-thirty in the morning. Middle-class Rome, that is. The Rome of thieves, on the other hand, is already up at six-forty-five, all crowded along the narrow street which at one point opens up on the hovels of Porta Portese, an evil little street that I had already known a few years ago when I had to go through it with the same anxiety as this morning in search of my dog Liebe, which had also been stolen from me.

As a matter of fact, the thieves of Rome had welcomed me until December, 1938, when they stole my handsome setter Liebe, which I found, locked up in an oven, hidden by a baker, a friend of the hunter who had stolen it from me. At that hour that end of the street at the Porta Portese was already awake, and the two railings of the bridge were also thronged with the pilfering gentry of the quarter. Thieves with one or two or even three bicycles mingled with vendors of figs, grapes and nuts. There was such a crowd that I began to fear that the thief would notice my presence before I could make my way through it to find my bicycle. I had supposed that at the Porta Portese there would be not more than about a hundred people, but there were, at the very least, two thousand. I began to



move slowly among the thieves, who were divided as though in ranks. In the first rank were those who had one or two bicycles to sell. These were old wrecks, the kind that at other times would have been found in the auction sales of the dispossessed. Bicycles without tyres or without inner tubes, bicycles unpainted, mended, in bits. Behind the first rank were the vendors of tyres, inner tubes and bicycle parts. I recognized in the first row some of the thieves that I had already noticed in the Piazza del Monte. There was one who had for sale three Wolsit bicycles, the type used by the former Fascist militia: black bicycles, strong and new, put up for sale at the slightly variable price, from one thief to another, of fifteen thousand lire. These vendors were thieves by profession or demobilized soldiers; they could have been both.

Among the thieves I noticed two young men who wore student badges in their buttonholes. They carried small suitcases and approached buyers warily. If the buyer was interested, then one of the two young men opened a suitcase and offered for sale black jerseys similar to those that the university Fascist militia used to wear. They also sold little packets of dye.

While I was pushing through the first ranks, a young man in a green shirt accosted me. He was a muscular, arrogant, overbearing young man. like an ancient Roman, or a former Fascist bully. Hard-faced and

brazen, he asked me if I was there in order to sell or buy.

‘To sell,’ I replied.

He had already noticed me in the Piazza del Monte and had returned to inspect me in the uncertain light as though to warn me that he knew who I was and also that he knew I was there, not so much for the purpose of selling anything as to try to find the thief who had stolen my bicycle and possibly to recover it. He asked me finally how much I was asking for the bicycle that I had with me; and to make it clear to him that I understood that he was trying to make a fool of me, I replied:

‘Thirty thousand lire!’

‘You’ll be lucky if some day I don’t sell it back to you for six thousand!’ he muttered, slinking away among the crowd, as much as to say that his gang in the Via della Scala would steal this bicycle also and the same thieves would later sell it back to me for six thousand lire.

I cursed myself for having let him see that I was still in a state of fury. I ought not to have asked him jeeringly for an improbable sum. I should have played the meek and mentioned the usual price for a bicycle such as the one I had with me. There was no point in offending thieves, or in irritating them. But this was my fault, a result, an indication, of my lack of experience. It is true that I had once managed to find in Rome another blue bicycle which had been stolen

from me; but this was no reason for priding myself on being a good finder or a model sleuth. I ought to have used a bantering tone to the young man who had accosted me, as I realized later, for he must have been a gang leader, a species of supervisor: perhaps he had had me under observation yesterday and was expecting me to-day, certain that I should come to Porta Portese to look for my bicycle.

As for the suppression of bicycle thefts, and as for police surveillance, listen to this: To-day, on my way to the Porta Portese, I went through the Piazza del Monte, for even though I had heard that on Sundays the square is completely free of thieves, I wanted to see for myself. The square was actually empty except for a melancholy, uniformed guard who, with his foot resting on a doorstep, looked like an early-morning drunk. From a window a girl was making signs to him in deaf-mute language, or the prisoners' alphabet. I decided to have a little fun with him.

'Good morning,' I said, as I drew near. 'Where are the thieves this morning?'

The guard, either because he was taken unawares by the question, or because he thought that I was being sarcastic, answered:

'Well, sir, being Sunday, they are all in the Porta Portese. If you will go down there, in that direction, anyone will show you where they are!'

I was not surprised by his answer, because yesterday

in the Piazza del Monte I had noticed among the thieves a *carabiniere* who was selling his black raincoat, and another who was selling a pair of black leggings. I continued on to the Porta Portese.

On the way I met a spindle-shanked girl who wore stockings, which was odd in these times of hunger and privation. A girl who is not a soldier's whore does not have four hundred lire to throw away on a pair of stockings full of runs. I observed musingly and with a poet's eye her skirt, her short skirt, which looked like a campanula. All this time I had been thinking of the beauty which no longer aroused my desire. I was comparing mentally the present, filled with grief and misfortune, with the period of my youth, when the one thing I never thought about was being hungry for food or hunting for thieves—it was a time when every girl was a source of inspiration. Then, and still pedaling, because the Porta Portese was far away, I thought of the time when I liked to consider girls from the point of view of their grace, their innocence, their beauty, while now I was obliged to devote all my time to remedying my ills by pursuing the thieves of my belongings: wallets, fountain pens, umbrellas and bicycles.

But to take up the thread of my tale: Only ten minutes after the inspection by the gang leader in the Porta Portese something happened that might have been a disaster but fortunately turned into a joke. It turned into a joke because, realizing that I should be

among thieves for half a day, I had taken the precaution before leaving the house, of sewing up the pocket where I kept my wallet and of emptying the others. A pickpocket had already attempted to look in the right-hand one and had turned the lining inside-out as a joke or a warning, or perhaps because he was enraged at not having been able to find anything to steal. Other thieves were arriving at the Porta Portese. They came from the Via della Lungara, and chiefly from the Via della Scala, the Via del Mattonato, the Vicolo del Cinque or the Vicolo del Piede. Others were coming from the section opposite the Aventine and from regions still farther away, from the Piazza Vittorio or from Garbatella. Even at seven o'clock in the morning it was already difficult to move in the square. The crowd was so dense that there was no point in asking permission to pass; one simply worked one's way through by shoving violently, and I had to do a good deal of pushing in order to get out. I noticed that a great many thieves were going through the arch of the Porta Portese towards the narrow street between the low houses, the broken-down walls, and the ruins of whitewashed barracks which stretch for half a kilometre along the bank of the river. Along that half-kilometre were gathered other bicycle thieves, as well as vendors of every sort of stolen goods: blankets and linen, hardware, blacksmiths', carpenters', cobblers', and masons' tools, used shoes, ribbons, needles, thread and other sewing things, even empty cans, ugly little

picture frames, ugly little oil paintings done by amateurs, broken pottery, handles, yellow-backed novels with stained and soiled pages—junk which in other times would have had no value whatever but now cannot be found in the stores of Rome. There was, for example, a thief selling boxes of little wax and wooden matches. I asked him where the matches came from. With Franciscan simplicity he confided that, in order to keep himself supplied, he went to the Termini Station and waited for the arrival of trains from Perugia, from whose passengers he acquired tobacco and matches at fifteen lire a hundred that he sold again for twenty-five or thirty.

One thief sold coarse salt, another sold openly the olive oil which the government does not distribute, not even in the smallest quantity, to the unfortunate and cheated holders of ration cards. There were chairs, and on the chairs were flasks filled with good oil; next to them were glasses which caught the last drops as they fell from tin funnels.

At the sight of this swarming misery, of these insect-like people with thin, sallow faces, I thought of humanity as seen through the eyes of poets and philosophers—poor humanity, seen by us through rose-coloured glasses, while reality consists at present of a people poor and crafty, people who, astutely and sometimes with real flashes of genius, succeed in assuaging hunger. Do poets like me, philosophers, believe perhaps that the poor are incompetent or that the bourgeois are

those who possess a speck more genius than the poor? Actually, it is just the opposite. The market of the Porta Portese shows that the poor are poor despite their extreme cunning and a quickness of wit which is equal to ours if not superior to it. I asked one of them how much a bicycle lamp, with its dynamo, cost.

‘Nine hundred lire: three hundred for the lamp and six hundred for the dynamo,’ he said. ‘Take it, and if it’s no good I’ll give back the nine hundred lire and no argument.’

I retorted: ‘You won’t have to give me back the nine hundred lire. Keep it.’

I continued to reason with myself: If a litre of oil to-day costs six hundred lire, while yesterday it cost six, it is only fair that a little lamp and dynamo should cost a hundred times more than they used to. The same goes for a pair of shoes.

Another thief had matches to sell. Boxes which in a cigar store cost two lire with coupons, cost twenty-five at the Porta Portese. Twenty-five lire for one hundred matches! One lire for four matches! It is the sort of thing that would make you not only laugh, but fear that the speech of the Minister of Finance, who assured us that the national debt amounted to only six hundred billions, was just a huge joke. Six hundred billions divided by forty million inhabitants would amount to fifteen thousand lire of national debt *per capita*. That is, every inhabitant would owe, theoretically, a few

months of income or of wages. Calculating the revenue from the fifteen thousand, every inhabitant would owe the state fifteen hundred lire per year. But the truth is quite different. With a moderate income or with an income of four thousand per month, only one pair of shoes or one suit can be bought.

So thinking, I looked meditatively at this hecatomb, this graveyard, made up of immense numbers of stolen articles.

I came to the end of the long narrow street, crowded with more thieves and vendors than buyers. At the end, in the place which is known as the Capannone, the market unexpectedly stops. At the edge of a peaceful marsh and to the left of it there is a country lane down which I walked in order to enjoy a bit of sun, rest, and fresh air. I glanced at a rustic fountain where a peasant woman was peacefully airing clothes; but when I spoke to her, even she answered me with poor grace, suspicious, that I too was a thief or a policeman in mufti.

I retraced my footsteps with difficulty, making a way for myself among the thousands of thieves. I was interested in returning to the place where the bicycles were displayed. A feeling of misplaced optimism made me hope that among these countless bicycles I should find mine. I began again to examine them, to count them one by one, to look at them closely. Tired of counting and looking and not finding any trace, either of the bicycle or of the thief, I thought of purchasing

another bicycle, and so I found myself asking the various prices. A ten-year-old wreck without tyres, but freshly painted, sold for six or seven thousand lire; a Bianchi bicycle sold for no less than twenty thousand. I noticed a boy in a group of thieves who had a new bicycle, gleaming with chrome plate, mudguards, lamp and two-wheel brakes. The tyres and frame were new. He walked along shouting, 'For sale—for sale!' and he stuttered as he shouted. I approached him, lifted the bicycle, made the chain run by moving a pedal. The sound was light, regular, almost musical. It was perfection, and I fell in love with it. He was asking eighteen thousand lire for it. It was a fair price in comparison with the offers I had been listening to for two days in discussions between buyers and sellers. I offered him twelve thousand.

'Wh-what? What?' said the stammerer. 'Ih-h-haven't stolen it! It c-cost me sixteen thousand lire. I have already been o-o-offered fourteen thousand, and I wouldn't t-t-take it!'

He left off, so as not to waste any more effort, and took up pen and paper. I noted that the poor stammerer was a better salesman than the others, and that he was only an occasional thief, if indeed one at all. Meantime I reasoned briefly with myself and my conscience. Should one buy from a thief? Is it not abetting him? Doesn't the law punish the receiver? But the law! Where is it in these times! On the other hand, try buying from an honest bicycle dealer. Just try it. He will

say that he has no bicycles to sell, either new or used. He hardly has a few tubes of glue that no longer sticks and a few old-fashioned pumps. Even the honest dealers advise you to go to a thief. And they themselves, the honest ones, are the suppliers, sometimes willing, sometimes unwilling, of the two markets of the Piazza del Monte and the Porta Portese. Thefts and hold-ups of bicycle stores occur, or rather used to occur, every night. They no longer do, for the simple reason that now all the shops have been emptied, either by thieves or by shopkeepers who have ended by hiding in cellars the few bicycles they have left. They began hiding them at the time of the German occupation of Rome, when the Nazis requisitioned bicycles and paid for them at the fixed price of one thousand lire each—if they paid for them at all. And from then on the sellers made contacts with fences and thieves. Perhaps now dealers sell new bicycles for ten thousand lire to fences who in turn sell them for twenty. This being the case, one can scarcely speak—in my case at least—of scruples of conscience. It is a matter of necessity, the necessity of buying a bicycle; and it can only be bought from fences and thieves, for they are the only ones who have any to sell. Remember, besides, that many of the buyers of bicycles are bicycle dealers themselves. This is understandable, for between Northern Italy, which is the chief producer of bicycles, and free Italy there is a barrier of fire where two foreign armies stand one against the other. So even the dealers are forced to buy

their bicycles at the Porta Portese, and perhaps a few of them repurchase the very ones which, before the coming of the Germans, they sold in the rosy hope that the war would soon be over and that the bicycles which used to pour in from Pavia, Busto Arsizio, Cremona, Brescia, Milan, Turin, and other cities, would continue to flow into Southern Italy. But one fine day tyres began to be in short supply, then inner tubes, then frames. Prices skyrocketed: nor is it likely that they will fall again soon after the war.

Like the good calculator that I am, but also like the Horatian poet who sees the best and clings to the worst, I decided to make up for the bicycle stolen from me on the 28th of September, 1944. I would acquire about ten bicycles, put them in storage for a couple of months, and then take them out and sell them for the astronomical price which they would have reached during that time. I saw how the traffic was going, and I, too, would know how to traffic. However, the truth is that in business matters I am an honest provincial, an unworldly man. I have never wanted to be in business, for I consider human existence to be but a brief passage during which it is not fitting to engage in worldly affairs. The best thing for a poet to do is to contemplate, to observe, and to make subjects of poetry of even the worst aspects of human existence.

In other words, it seems better to me to be a poet and to be poor, to remain poor, to live like the poor, than

to become a thief, and more or less a dealer in stolen goods. This is all very fine, but in the meantime I needed a second bicycle. What should I do if, in a month or two or three, even the blue bicycle were stolen from me? Should I go on foot when the street-cars are not running? A man on horse and a man on foot are not equal. It is better to be the man on horse-back—especially when one intends to remain on the horse, not to abuse one's privilege, but simply for the purpose of legitimate defence. And for me, to get away for a few hours of the day outside the city, far away, in the fields, is an act of legitimate defence. As I have already said, the far-away fields can be reached only by bicycle.

I decided to acquire one that was even handsomer than the one which was stolen from me the day before yesterday, so I began seriously to negotiate. If I want to, I can be a good negotiator; the difficulty is in getting me to do it. I can assume a mild, conciliating air, which takes in the seller. I didn't start out by complaining that eighteen thousand lire was too much. Instead, I said: 'It isn't much, but all I have is fifteen thousand lire.' So saying, I ripped out the stitches I had taken in my pocket to safeguard its contents and took from it the fifteen large notes. Thieves love thousand-lire notes as I love Anna Stickler. Money excites them, and they go crazy over it. They are indifferent to women, indifferent to eating well and drinking better, they steal

for the simple pleasure of stealing, for it is their instinct. Their coat-of-arms (if they had one) should represent a flycatcher plant or a dusty spiderweb. How much thread the poor spider weaves, and for what? For a miserable fly! Would you make so much effort for so little? Well, thieves work hard at their profession and thousand-lire notes mean as much to them as some of Musset's songs mean to me, or the poetry of Cardinal Du Bellay, the friend of my friend Rabelais.

But to come back to the bicycle in question. I have said that the young thief was looking at me furtively, his squinting eyes sharp and intense. He stared so at me that I asked him point-blank if his eyes were hurting. At that, he told me the following story: During an American bombing near the Piazza Bologna, he had almost been killed, asphyxiated, under the broken walls of his house, which had been destroyed by an explosion. He had escaped, but had been so terrified by the experience that for ten or twelve days he had been unable to speak and was half blind. Then, when he had come to, he began to stutter and his eyes watered. Sometimes he could see and sometimes he could not, for his vision was occasionally blurred.

'Poor boy!' I exclaimed. 'You got off easy, as a matter of fact, for it could have been much worse for you.'

After he and I had become friends, in a manner of speaking, he began to tell me a tale of bicycles and of a

shop which he said (he was probably lying) belonged to him, and from the rubble of which he had managed with great difficulty to dig three or four bicycles. I pieced together the picture which, with a 99 per cent. chance of probability, was as follows: He and his family had been left destitute by the bombing, but under his flat there must have been a bicycle shop whose owner had probably died, crushed under the rubble and bicycles. Days afterwards, the young stutterer had taken to looting among the ruins. If he had really been a bicycle mechanic or owner of a bicycle store he would not, on this or any other morning, have brought to the market a magnificent new bicycle to sell, splendid in its many gleaming accessories, but lacking a light and a dynamo. Bicycle mechanics are crafty, and for that reason sell their bicycles completely equipped, furnished with every accessory, in order not to give a pretext to the buyer for making the most of a lack of lamp or dynamo or tool case. I explained in a roundabout way that since these accessories were missing, my offer could be considered fair. He lowered the price. There was then an endless period of wrangling which I should have found oppressive, had I not enjoyed it. How avid for money thieves are! He clung to fifteen thousand five hundred lire and did not want to lower the price, so I adopted another stratagem. I began to speak of this and that and finally of politics. But soon I noticed something I had never noticed before. I had always supposed that thieves had

little traffic with women, wine, and the like; but I did suppose them to be enemies of capitalism and passionate supporters of the theory that 'property is theft': thieves, in short, for philosophic reasons, thieves *à la* Verlaine for poetic reasons. Instead, it is quite the opposite.

Thieves are interested only in stealing, and are completely indifferent to politics, so much so that I did not succeed in understanding if this thief backed the Germans or the Allies. I supposed, for a split second, that he was an anarchist, but I was certainly wrong there. He was simply the sort of person for whom Germans, Allies, communists, and so on, just come and go, while there exists but one reality: to steal, not to work.

I should be curious to know what thieves do, how they spend their days when they are not stealing. They probably spend them learning the tricks of the trade, teaching one another, studying other hold-ups with burning interest, analysing the exploits of other thieves, envying one another, as we poets and artists and writers do. We do nothing but criticize one another, to the great amusement and edification of the public. Finally, through a stroke of luck which befell me, the thief made up his mind. Another thief, a fence, had come close to where we were bargaining, and said that he wanted the bicycle that I had said I wanted. He was anything but friendly and tried to get rid of me and of the other buyers. Whenever he saw a new one approaching, he would listen, and when it looked as

though a sale were about to be made, he would propose buying the bicycle himself:

'How much do you want? Eighteen? You're crazy! A Bianchi, a super-Bianchi, was sold yesterday for fifteen! You mean fifteen thousand for the chrome work? and three thousand for the rest? The only good thing in yours is the chrome work, which, however, won't last unless it is well taken care of and the bicycle is kept in a dry place, and polished every day. And you've decided that it is worth fifteen thousand? Well, you won't find a dog who'll give you thirteen thousand for it!'

I understood from all this that even a dog (and he too) would have paid thirteen thousand for it. He appeared to be interested, which meant, as anyone could see, that the bicycle was worth sixteen thousand lire at the very least. The boy beckoned to me; we stepped aside, and he accepted my fifteen thousand lire. After this there was nothing for me to do but invite him to get on the bicycle for, living in Prati, I could not alone wheel two bicycles such a distance.

When we were at the gate of No. 27 Via Oslavia, I stopped. Actually, I live at No. 37; but I thought it safer not to let him know my address. I paid him the fifteen thousand lire and sent him on his way. I carried my bicycle up to the seventh floor and locked it up in my studio. An unwarranted optimism was whispering to me that I should also find my bicycle thief, and so, without noticing the distance, I returned to the Porta

Portese. Here, at ten-thirty, what with people and bicycles, the crush was such that it was quite impossible to move.

I made my way through the crowd with difficulty. I noticed among the buyers a few respectable-looking men, but they were as rare as hens' teeth. It was easy to spot them, because of their naïve questions. One of them was looking for tobacco. He found a pedlar who offered him a package of what looked like the leaves of dried beet. According to some cookery books dried-out beet leaves can be treated so that they will look like tobacco.

He asked, 'But is it tobacco?'

The thief kept a straight face, though he realized that he was dealing either with an honest man or with a fool. The buyer was such a fool that he turned to one of the onlookers to ask if these were really tobacco leaves. And the thief, taking advantage of this display of ignorance, told him that the cost would be seven hundred lire a kilo, while before he had offered them for five hundred. This came to seventy lire a hundred grammes. I had noticed that a package of American tobacco, even in the black market, costs fifty lire and weighs more than one hundred grammes, which made me realize that those who make prices rise are precisely those incurably stupid people who accept blindly the prices demanded for stolen goods.

I saw that in a space of five hundred metres there were no fewer than fifty card and roulette players,

whose equipment was spread on little tables set on tripods. Meantime, I looked around on all sides, but there was no sign of either my bicycle or my thief. It occurred to me that my bicycle had already been taken apart, and so I spent a couple of hours closely examining wheels and pedals; but all in vain.

While I was thus occupied I noticed a thief who, undisturbed by the crowd, was dismantling and altering a flame-coloured bicycle, scratching out the serial number, the maker's name, and the lines of different colours stamped on the frame.

At this point six British MP's in geranium-red caps, accompanied by two of our guards, appeared in a small military truck. With their smiling, clean-shaven faces and their powerful builds, they created quite a stir; but it was soon obvious that they had come on business of their own. In fact, they arrested one unfortunate man who was trying to sell a pair of American Army boots, stolen perhaps from an Allied soldier or given by a Negro or a Senegalese to the wife or daughter of a dealer of stolen goods. They made him get into the truck, and slowly, still smiling pleasantly, went off together with the bird that they had caught in a trap. The thieves made little comment, being unconscious stoics and true philosophers. They asked one another briefly:

'What happened?'

'He was selling a pair of American shoes!'

The opening made by the slow-moving car was

immediately closed up, and everyone went back, more or less resignedly, to run the risk of ending up in jail, a risk that was not immediate but probable. As a matter of fact, a policeman was telling me yesterday, one day the Allies showed up in the Porta Portese and arrested a few thieves. There was no commotion; the crowd vanished silently and swiftly. I was sorry to have missed it, for I should have laughed. I pictured the scene to myself. I imagined every pedlar hurriedly packing up his belongings and leaping upon his bicycle, riding off to a field or back alley. I calculated that, to arrest five thousand thieves, twenty thousand soldiers at least would be needed. And then what? Where could five thousand thieves be put? The prisons are already filled with them. In my opinion thieves should be arrested a few at a time in weekly raids. Arrested, sentenced to hard labour in the islands; re-educated, if that helps. Or, better still, sent to isolated islands with other criminals, so that, thief robbing thief, they would realize that stealing is, at the very least, inconvenient and annoying to the victim. They would be left on the island without food or clothing. Perhaps then they would start working, although work would not really mean anything more than stealing, for they would steal fish from the sea and roots and plants from the earth. After all, what did Adam do? Certainly in his time there did not exist either buyers or sellers, neither money nor bills nor hundred-lire notes. Adam took the apple from Eve and other fruit where he found it.

He stole, but he did not really steal. He was not guilty of this crime, because everything was his. Everything belonged to the first-comer: the delicious peaches, the ripe pears, the nuts, the sweet figs, the fragrant grapes. Nor did Adam have to ride on a bicycle to get his most recent article to a newspaper on time for the next issue. Adam got along without these things; but, for the rest, he laid hands on everything he saw. He began by stealing Eve and ended by stealing the happiness that God had promised to His innocent, immaculate, and celestial creatures.

I wasn't really discouraged at having found no trace, no clue, no indication as to where I could find my bicycle; but I was verging on it. So, to try to cheer myself up by other methods, I began to move around the Porta Portese and came upon a pair of adjacent evil-looking little bicycle shops that resembled small caves. On one was written brazenly, 'Bicycles Repaired and Dismantled,' which meant 'Help Given to Thieves. Inside, four or five questionable-looking young men were absorbed in dismounting bicycles and putting them together again: which means nothing more nor less than tricking the customer. When I entered the shop the young men did not budge: they pretended to see nothing, and did not reply to my greeting. One glance had shown them that I had come for an inspection, the routine inspection made by the unfortunates who have been robbed.

With a calm and indifference equal to theirs, I

examined everything closely. One of the men was painting red a new bicycle which originally had been nickel coloured. Another was engaged on something that required more skill, removing a dent from a frame. He hammered above the dent in order to remove it; then he filed. With a skilful blow of the hammer he removed from the frame the hinge that was there to support the pump, and filed it down so that it disappeared completely, leaving no trace of the support. A third man was removing the mudguards from another bicycle and substituting an entirely different pair. Finally, a fourth worker in the rear of the shop was twisting a handlebar over a flame. It was an old handlebar, so curved that it looked like the horns of a marsh ox. He removed a portion from each end, thus turning it into an ordinary handlebar. But that is not all. You have no idea how clever these men are. They camouflage even the inner tubes, stripping the old pieces of patching and substituting pieces of a different size. They separate a dynamo and lamp of the same make and couple the lamp of one make with the dynamo of another, and vice versa. They file off serial numbers or fill up the dents made by them. The most difficult part is disguising tyres; but they know how to do this also, because they have stocks of old ones, some that are ten years old, which they put into use, sending into reserve in a hiding-place the tyres that have recently been removed. As for pedals, the ones that are part metal and part rubber are very easy to disguise. Those

that are edged with iron are changed by filing down the rims and adding to the number of teeth. After all this, try to recognize, if you can, a bicycle that has been repainted and has had its pedals and handlebars altered.

In the Via della Bottegheffa, I witnessed more camouflagings. There I found a bicycle vendor who was so aggressive that he almost hit me. I asked him if I could come into his shop, and explained my reason. I told him that I had been robbed of a bicycle and was coming to him, as I had already gone to other vendors, to give the registration number so that the thief might be caught. If the bicycle had fallen into his hands, there were two alternatives: either as an honest dealer he would have put it aside, or as a dishonest one he would have camouflaged it.

‘What fools we are!’ he replied. ‘All right. You may come in—it is your right. But leave your bicycle outside. My shop is narrow, and it would be in my way.’

Meantime, outside the shop the presence of four or five questionable-looking young idlers was not reassuring. What was I to do? Since the shopkeeper did not want me to bring in my bicycle, I went and asked a nearby restaurant keeper if I might leave it with him for ten minutes. He refused, and so I went on to a little old woman, a dyer, and begged so much that she consented. It is common knowledge that women are more honest or, I should say, less dishonest than

men. When I went back to the bicycle seller, he exploded.

'Do you mean to tell me,' he shouted furiously, 'that I am in league with thieves? You're the one who's the thief! I don't know you! Show me your identification papers! Let me see your card!'

I showed them to him with exaggerated courtesy. However, this did not either slow him down or calm him. At that moment I saw a policeman and had the unfortunate idea of asking him for help. He excused himself as he was not on duty: it was only by chance that he happened to be passing, for he was on leave. The shameful truth is that he did not want to help me, and that is why I shall not succeed in finding my bicycle. The police, equipped with large black boots, black satin tunic, bright red or purple armbands, and supported by decent citizens, are a burden on the impoverished state treasury and are busy about everything except their business. A policeman's major concern in these bad times is in trying to find enough to eat, for the sad truth is that our government has never sufficiently paid the police who are in charge of public order and the prevention of crimes. Meantime, the bicycle seller, infuriated by what he referred to as a wilful and stupid insult, started to tell me off.

At first, I tried to calm him, to make him see reason. Then I too, alas, began to lose my temper, without descending to the level of his vulgar abuses. I said to him:

‘But what are you worried about? I haven’t done anything to you. I’m the one who’s been robbed, not you! An honest man like you could help me find the thief. You should help me.’

He became even more infuriated:

‘What do you mean? Damn it! Are you trying to tell me I am not honest? I’ll show you!’

And a torrent of the choicest invective, poured out.

‘Easy, easy now.’

But I finally had to ask the help of some passers-by to calm him. Perhaps he would not have knocked me down; but I certainly ran the risk of receiving a blow or, what is to me equally offensive, giving him a good one myself.

He was one of those who particularly dislike interference. Romans always like to appear to be right, especially when they are wrong and they know it. They are gangsters, but unlike the Neapolitan gangsters, who are at once pathetic, swindling and smiling, they don’t put on an act; they blow up like the native storms on the Tiber.

I retrieved my bicycle from the old woman and returned to the Porta Portese. It was then noon. I wandered about aimlessly. Among the five hundred stolen bicycles were some aluminium ones like mine which I inspected as best I could, one by one; but it was not among them. Then I thought back to the time of

the theft, when my bicycle was snatched from under my very nose. I thought back to the people who were in the piazzetta where the Via dei Baullari starts. Who were they? Carters, porters. Porters who had become rich because in Italy demagogy has succeeded demagogy. And every one of them was right: all those that, instead, were really wrong, just as the porters used to be wrong with their twenty-five lire fee for every small suitcase carried from the inside of the station to the street, and not carried by hand, either, but all piled up on a cart with fine rubber tyres. I feared then that my bicycle had ended up with the frame in the Porta Portese or in the Piazza del Monte, and the wheels—those beautiful wheels!—on some cart belonging to an old lemonade vendor at the Termini Station or perhaps on a cart belonging to a group of porters.

Four or five carts drawn by draught horses—beautiful animals they were, stolen from the hippodrome of the Tor di Quinto at the time of Badoglio's flight or, more probably, from some artillery barracks—were stationed in the Piazzetta del Teatro di Pompeo, close to the Via dei Baullari, from sunrise to sunset. In each cart were three or four porters, young and old, all smoking more or less happily. One of them looked like my bicycle thief. How well I remembered the face! And I remembered having said to the shopkeeper who sold black shoe polish:

'I'm going to padlock my bicycle.'

But, in that split second as I moved towards him, the

thief measured the jump, got on the bicycle, and escaped, abetted in his flight by three or four accomplices, also on bicycles, while two others, on foot, spoke to me and suggested that I make no fuss because those who were following the thief were trying not to help him, but to stop him. Not one of the carters who had been there had made a move. The thief may have been one of their young companions or the son of one of the porters.

The short one, with a trumpet nose and sharp eyes too close together, looked as much like the young thief as a father can look like his son. That must be the one, I muttered to myself. He had approached me—the others remaining slyly impassive—after my attempt to follow the thief and his accomplices, the only one to ask me if the thief had been caught and in which direction he had vanished.

If what one can read in somebody's eyes means anything, as I have believed ever since I had any experience with men, I can truly say that I read in the eyes of the father that his son was the one who had robbed me. He tried to seem unconcerned, but he was not. His eyes were lowered like those of a guilty man. He remained leaning against his cart, elbows propped on the sides, chin resting on his hands, a pose he strove unsuccessfully to make natural. All these things came back to me while I stood, as though on guard, at the entrance to the bridge, and tried to watch carefully the coming and going of people from the Porta Portese.

It was now one-thirty. I was famished. I had to make a tremendous effort to put off my lunch for another half-hour, and continued to watch, thief by thief, bicycle by bicycle, the exit from the Porta Portese. However, there was not one trace of my bicycle.

So, I said to myself, I shall have to try something different. But how, without the help of the police? It would be easy to call the porters of the Via dei Baullari to police headquarters and question them, one by one. Make one of them understand that the thief was already known, threaten another. Unfortunately, threats are sometimes necessary to bring out the truth. This is legal, but beating a suspect is not. The chief thing is to know how to act, and how to confuse those who have given false testimony, or who are in league and won't talk. As for porters, they are the most quarrelsome group of all. There is a strong bond of solidarity among them, but a tone of voice, a quiet reply, is enough to set them off. How I should like to be a policeman! The slightest contradiction in the testimony of four witnesses to a single incident can shed some light on the truth. In this case how did I know that porter really was, as I supposed him to be, the young thief's father? If he was, one would only have to ask him how many children he had; then it would be easy to check whether or not he had included the son, who was about twenty years old, whom I saw stealing my bicycle. It would be perfectly simple to summon

the son. Besides, the thief's hair had been cut with mule clippers; and it was plain from his appearance that either he had recently come out from a prison where the inmates' hair is sheared with mule clippers, or else he had had his hair cut by some amateur barber. In these times a haircut costs as much as four chickens or as three or four kilos of beef used to cost. As for the thief's face, I have never been much of a believer in anthropometry; but then why did I exclaim just before he robbed me and while he was reaching for the handlebars of my bicycle, 'I don't like that face'? It was a typical thief's face, flabby, with the flat, oily nostrils thieves are apt to have, and pin-point eyes like a reptile's.

On the second day, thinking about my search and about what I have already written, I realized that I had forgotten to tell something which has an interest that is more than merely descriptive: Among the fences, rag-pickers, and thieves in the Porta Portese was a school-teacher; and he must certainly have been among those who had been purged. He had the unprepossessing face of a man who is habitually victimized. He sold pen points, fountain pens, erasers, notebooks, stationery, all stolen from the office of his last employment. Now, on the street corner, it was easy to tell what he had once been: a typical little functionary of the lowest order of the Fascist hierarchy. He was neither a disillusioned visionary nor a martyr; for, had he been, he would not

have had an inclination to steal. He was especially remarkable as a gossip and a windbag.

He was one of those who received telephone calls from section chiefs ordering them to deliver speeches prepared by the Fascist Party. He scribbled articles for God knows what little Fascist sheets. And yet he managed never to get caught in the web woven with his articles. Woe to those who write, for the spoken word vanishes, but the written word remains. A word of advice to the spurious heroes, political adventurers of every period and of every colour: Talk as much as you want, say anything you like in order to harass, intimidate, threaten, but never leave written traces behind. Ten, twenty vindictive people may have informed against this infinitely small Fascist cog. And now, in the Porta Portese, he has spread out his little blanket on the barren ground like the other thieves and outlaws. And there, poor devil, in order to provide for two or three innocent creatures, he sells the stolen articles.

On the morning of the third day of my search I got up before dawn. I had decided the day before to set out on a new track; and because I had been told that the carters arrived at the Via dei Baullari, near the small Piazza del Teatro di Pompeo about six o'clock, I was in a hurry to get there before that time. My idea was that the carters who had been present when my bicycle was stolen, and who had heard my shouts of 'Stop thief!' must certainly have turned to look at him as he was

escaping and at his accomplices who had pretended to run after him. If the robber was known in this neighbourhood, they must certainly have recognized him and so could easily give me useful information.

On the other hand, I suspected that the twenty-year-old thief, if not actually one of the carters, was perhaps one of their helpers. The day before, a wine merchant had regaled me with tales of the honesty of those carters and had assured me that most of them were swindlers, and that almost all of them lived between the Via della Scala, the Via del Mattonato and the Vicolo del Piede.

At six o'clock I was already in the Via dei Baullari; but evidently the porters were still in their stables. I thought of bicycling to the Via della Scala, which is on the other side of the Tiber near the Ponte Sisto, next to the street where Raphael's Fornarina lived. It is obvious that he was too young a poet to pick his women in a lair of prostitutes and brigands. These are the alleys where, in the still active black market, potatoes by the quintal are at all times sold openly, and I found a crowd of dishevelled women, and housewives who had come from other quarters, standing in front of the unsavoury-looking shops. I say the Via della Scala and the Via Benedetta—the street of the blessed; but I ought to say the street of the damned. And so I came to the Via del Mattonato, a silent, evil little street that leans against the Janiculum, with carters' stalls, wide alleys, stables filled with carts. The street smells of hay, dung and

horse urine. Under the arch of one of the alleys stood five young men who were laughing and joking as rowdies so often do. However, their gaiety was convulsive, like that of convicts. They gabbled like chickens, each pecking at another with words. They indulged in obscene sarcasms and retorts. All this took place, under their archways, before the eyes of their women and children. The thieves recognized me at once and began to jeer. One of them, bolder than the others, came forward and said, 'Well, Mister, where are you going so early?'

Anyone who irritates them, or who they suspect is there to stir them up, or perhaps in whom they recognize a superior type, they call 'Mister.' I replied that I was looking for a bicycle that had been stolen from me two days ago in the Via dei Baullari.

One of them said, with a sneer: 'And after two days you are still looking for it? And you haven't found it yet?'

The others jumped on me: 'Every one comes here to look for stolen goods. What do you think we are? Thieves?'

'I shouldn't dream of saying such a thing,' I said calmly, 'but I should like to know what you would do, if you were a poor employee whose wages are too small to live on for more than two weeks out of every month, and who has to live on bread and greens. What would you do if you had lost or mislaid something worth fifteen thousand lire!'

One of them replied, 'Cut it out, Mister, cut it out!'

During this exchange another member of the gang appeared, resplendent in a Brazilian-type cap, with wide flaps and a cone-shaped crown. Though the youngest, he seemed to be the leader; probably one of the numerous Fascist squadron leaders who had once pointed out to me, 'Trastevere is Trastevere, and the true Rome is Trastevere'—in short, all those who didn't look upon the great Trastevere as such were asses.

He stank of ancient Rome and of recent Fascism. If Fascism had not collapsed, he would have become the leading bully of his group.

These five young men from the other side of the Tiber appeared to have it in for me. Despite the fact that I had caught them laughing loudly among themselves, they now took to threatening me, not because of what I had said, but because they had worked themselves up into a passion with their own remarks on the 'noble people of the Trastevere.' A noble rabble which from the times of Marius and Sulla has withstood thousands of identical demagogues. On this point I foresee that among the readers of my tale of thieves will be a critic, a censor, a furious opponent of my views. But it doesn't matter. The honest people who live in the Trastevere must not see in me a slanderer, but a man who has never been afraid to speak his mind and has always distinguished between honest men and

thieves. Meantime the young men became more threatening.

Usually the first thing they try to do, jokingly, is to take their victim by the collar and shake him. If he faces them unflinchingly and does not lose his temper they start making threatening gestures. Should he take fright, that would be the end of him. They are bullies, capable of dragging the unfortunate man to a passageway to beat him and fleece him and perhaps kill him.

I started to talk about the noble Trastevere and told them that I was a painter. This did not make them more pleasant, but at least it calmed them somewhat. Meanwhile, a little old woman who looked like a witch came down one of the short flights of stairs which lead to the street. Her wrinkled face was the colour of a yellow pepper or ripe squash. She seemed on the point of stepping into the other world, but her looks were deceptive, for she was alert beyond her years. Her eyes darted, quick as those of a juggler, and I gathered from their expression a feeling of intense surprise caused, certainly, by my presence. The old woman did not enter into the conversation. She called one of the young scoundrels aside, made some inconsequential remark aloud, but in a whisper asked him if I were a police agent.

'They don't come this far!' I thought I heard the young man say.

Still speaking of the Trastevere, the five young men continued to brag. One took from his wallet some thousand-lire notes; another, not having committed a theft recently, was unable to produce anything more than a hunting licence. He showed it to me as he would have shown some talisman, or as one who had been in prison ten times would show his discharge papers. I wondered how he had managed to get a hunting licence. An explanation was not long in coming. The new government, it seemed, had enlisted in its ranks even the worst elements of Fascism, so that it was enough to go to the Palace of Justice and say that one belonged to such and such a party and show the certificate of inscription, in order to obtain a clean penal certificate—which was given even if one had a prison record.

The thief began to talk about guns. At first he said that he had at least ten; then, not noticing the rapid contradiction, he ended by saying that he owned only one, and that had a broken 'handle.' He meant to say a broken rifle stock. He had probably picked it up during one of the incidents of July 25th, 1943, or at the time of Badoglio's flight, or during the return of the Germans or their flight. First he said that he was a great hunter, then asked me if a broken rifle stock could be repaired, which meant that he had never owned a hunting rifle. Before I finally took leave of these fine friends, they attempted to turn the conversation on women. They did it to see if they could act as pimps and extort some

money from me; but despite the fact that I am an author and have written about many women, I turned a deaf ear to their suggestions, which in reality did not interest me.

The thieves had given me a thorough examination. I knew that for two days they had discussed me among themselves in their cafés, for even among thieves there are always some scribblers and second-rate painters who could have told the others about me, especially one, an incompetent forger of paintings, who lived with the thieves of Rome. He was a sneaky-looking old man, soft-spoken, humble, who made copies of the works of the most noted Italian painters of the nineteenth century, from Irolli to Modigliani. He must have told the thieves lies about me; said that I had been a Fascist. And why? Because once he presented himself at an exhibition with a painting that was a 'forged authentic.' That was the best that could be said of it. If I said an 'authentic forgery,' it would amount to the same thing. He had imitated the German painter Hofer; but instead of forging the artist's signature on the spurious Hofer, he had signed his own name. At that time I was writing for the *Quadrivio*, and I warned the old man not to fool with the saints and to present the copies as copies.

He said nothing. He did as so many painters^{ab} do who are attacked by critics. He did not reply, but plotted revenge and harboured hate and¹ resentment against me. At the time of the *coup d'état* of the 25th of

July he went about shouting that I was a Fascist. Heaven forbid! I was in the middle of a crowd, expressing my joy at the fall of Fascism. The crowd would have lynched me then and there had I not been accompanied by a few friends who defended me, shouting: 'It's not true! He was sent into exile! He was sent into exile for anti-Fascism!' I carried with me the old red booklet issued to the inmates of Montefusco, which also helped to save my skin. It was well that I had written for the *Quadrivio* on artistic and literary matters, and my enemy had the worst of it.

But to come back to my subject, which deals with the scum whose stench still rises to-day as it rose in Rome at the time of Marius and Sulla and under Mussolini: While going through the Via della Scala I noticed in a sinister-looking little café a man who had an aluminium bicycle very much like mine. It occurred to me that he might be a thief; and, as a matter of fact, I was not wrong. He was there on an errand from the Piazza del Monte. I approached him and stared at the bicycle because it looked like mine.

'Well,' he said, as if to say, 'What are you looking at?'

'Is it for sale?'

'Twelve thousand lire!'

The words came in little bursts, in the same tone that Caligula must have used when he asked for the twelve roasted butterfly tongues. His evil face looked like that of an old Roman emperor, a megalomaniac, nervous

and epileptic, like Julius Cæsar. It would have been dangerous to cross him.

‘A bicycle more or less like this one has already been offered to me,’ I said. ‘In fact, I am going to see it now. If we don’t come to terms, I’ll come back to you!’

He saw through the deception. He had evidently been sent from the Via del Mattonato where, as I have said, there is a bicycle cache, with orders to catch up with me and station himself at the corner of the narrow passage through which I was to pass; in other words, in the sinister little café.

He had been told to see if I wanted to buy a bicycle more or less like the one that had been stolen from me. It is natural for someone who has lost or worn out a pair of square-toed shoes to look for another pair just like them; and, in the same way, whoever has lost an aluminium bicycle will most probably want to get another one like it. If the lost bicycle had racing handlebars, quite probably whoever has been robbed will want one with the same kind of handlebars. This meant that the thieves had several caches near the Via del Mattonato, and it meant that they hoped that, having found a bicycle more or less like the one that I had lost, I would pay the twelve thousand lire and keep quiet. It meant also that the thieves had become suspicious and alarmed about me, alarmed because I showed no inclination to let the matter drop, like so many Romans whose bicycles have been stolen, and who are unwilling to waste any time looking for them.

Nowadays, time is money in Rome, just as it is in London, and perhaps only I, an artist and a philosopher, can permit myself the luxury of turning into a detective, to look day after day for a stolen bicycle. I am not letting the matter drop, because I consider the finding of lost objects an art in itself.

And what an art! One that has a certain sporting element about it. But thieves do not look upon their wretched trade as a sport. They are afraid of those who are at their heels. They swarm and prosper only when no one stops them. Man is, at best, a thief by nature. There are political theories that admit of stealing. St. Francis himself said in his rule that while going through the country one might take from a tree as many figs or as many grapes as can be contained in a small bundle. He also gave the measurements of the bundle: These are not to be greater than a silken kerchief. But enough! To-day a silken bag filled with fresh figs at sixty lire a kilo represents the tidy sum of about six hundred lire. According to St. Francis, then, one may steal up to the value of six hundred lire. If you want, rob someone who has at least six thousand lire, but not a poor poet! At any rate, not even St. Francis would condone the theft of a bicycle worth fifteen thousand lire. I don't know whether Mr. X who at the time of the Fascist regime lived in Russia, not only quietly, but even under an assumed name, tolerates or approves of it. As for me, I should never, had I been in his boots, given permission for an enormous red flag with a hammer

and sickle to fly, you will never be able to guess where? Over St. Peter's, the Quirinal, Castel Sant' Angelo? I should say not! If it were to fly there, I too would emulate the pelican, for the pelican, after having beaten his breast with his beak, as though saying 'Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa,' opens up his veins and lets his blood flow, so that his clamorous offspring can drink it. But the evil of it is that the red flag has been allowed to fly with its hammer and sickle in the Piazza del Monte, the notorious meeting place of thieves, where not twenty feet away there is a party cell. Don't the partisans see the sweet murderers, the dear thieves who meet every day in the Piazzetta to sell objects which have been stolen from other thieves? Farewell to our visions of a bright future!

And so, talking to myself, I mounted my bicycle and went back over the Ponte Garibaldi to that part of the Tiber, towards the long shady street on the left, which opens out on the Piazza del Monte. Although I was heading for the Via dei Baullari, I wanted to see the Piazza del Monte once more. While I was crossing the shady street, I suddenly saw a crowd gather. The crowd milled about, shouting and threatening, and it was with difficulty that I pieced together the story of a little girl, not more than nine years old, who had stolen a purse from a thin, elderly woman in mourning who was accompanied by a man of my age. The theft had occurred in the church which is half-way down to-

wards this narrow street. The husband and wife had no doubt gone into the church to ask for a favour or to pray for one of their dead, perhaps a son killed during the war. In the fervour of their praying, their heads hidden penguin-fashion, hands clasped in prayer, a little gypsy girl had crept up and robbed them. The woman had noticed it almost at once and had run after her the length of the church and grabbed her, while a woman obviously the little girl's mother, leaning against the steps that led to the church, waited for the little thief to give her the loot and then escape. There is nothing unusual in this, for often thieves, in an attempt to kill two birds with one stone, train their children to pick pockets and to steal, for they don't run the risk of adults if caught red-handed. The innocence of youth excuses the children, so that a child who has stolen can say, 'I didn't do it on purpose,' or 'I didn't know,' 'I didn't mean to.' Or the youngster may say she was hungry—'I thought there was some fruit in the bag!' or something of the sort. The little girl had started to shriek, and continued shrieking when there was no need for it. The elderly lady, thin and pale—a school-teacher, perhaps, for she looked like an educated person—wanted only to get back her purse, for in it was an object of great value; and this object was no longer there. But, would you believe it, here was a crowd of forty or fifty people coming out of shops, running from other streets, especially, from the Piazza del Monte, in order to curse the poor woman who had

been robbed and her husband who was defending her. You would believe this only if you were one of those Romans who believe that everything is permitted them, especially stealing. I noticed a fat, puffy young woman, at least as plump as a Guido Reni, who if not a harlot certainly looked like one. She was ferocious in her attitude towards the woman, demanding that she leave the little girl alone, that she not touch her or hurt her. But, as I have said, the 'hurting her' was a pretext and a lie. No one was hurting her. The little girl herself was shrieking for no reason other than to attract the crowd to her defence or to get away, intimidating the woman by crying 'Help!' with unchildlike artfulness and by pretending to be ill-treated. True, not everyone was saying that the woman who had been robbed was wrong, for among the fifty people who had gathered were three or four who were starting to murmur against the thieves and against mothers who teach their children to rob. These people were saying loudly that the robbed lady was quite right to attempt to recover the object of value that had been in her purse. The woman was saying to the little girl:

'Please tell me where you put my gold ring. To whom did you give it? It belonged to my son who died in the war! Give it back to me. Did you give it to your mother?'

Still calm, she turned towards the crowd: 'I don't want to hurt the child. She can go if she will only return the ring.'

'Let her go, you coward! You slut!' the crowd shouted. Slatternly-looking women were shouting what had now become the customary refrain: 'Fascist! Fascist!' A strange refrain, for the people who were now shouting, I could swear—and my memory does not often fail me, for I well remember the Fascist meetings and parades which I saw from a distance—were the very people who had filled the air with the old Fascist cries of 'Eia! We want war! Viva il Duce! Du-ce! Du-ce! Du-ce!' This was shouted rhythmically for minutes, sometimes a whole quarter of an hour, until the mob had shouted itself hoarse. In those days there was promise of food on the part of the tyrant, the same old promise of 'Bread and circuses,' the only thing in which the multitude is interested. It isn't that these are unreasonable demands, but the price of fun is hard work. In other words, joy cannot be, must not be, anything but the reward for healthy, honestly completed work. And this does not mean work by a wretched colonial for an unscrupulous colonizer. Every European country, whether it be poor or rich, now wants to exploit the colonies and to live at their expense. We want to eat, but do not want to work, and in this consists the immorality of colonizers and imperialists, whether they be Russian, French, Japanese, English or Italian.

In the Piazza del Monte I approached two girls who were selling stolen hardware for a dealer who hadn't

the courage to go himself into the black market. Their ware consisted entirely of bicycle locks in the shape of a horseshoe, which can still be found in a few stores in Rome. As a matter of fact, I had acquired one the day before. It had cost me ninety lire, which is high even in the black market, for its value a year ago was three lire. One of the girls was asking one hundred and ninety, and the other two hundred and ninety lire.

'Make up your mind!' I said smilingly.

But they took my remark amiss and began to grumble. 'Give us food and work!'

'Why ask me?' I said placidly. 'What do you think I am? The government? And what do you think I earn? Wages that cost me in taxes at least four thousand lire a month even though I work honestly from morning till night.'

'Lucky you who can afford to work for nothing,' they replied. They understood the pleasantry but did not let on, and replied flatly: 'We don't feel like working for nothing. Lucky you, who do.'

Meantime, one of them took from her bosom a handful of thousand-lire notes. There must have been about forty of them. In taking them out she unbuttoned her dirty blouse and I noticed that she wore an expensive slip of flowered pink silk, so pretty that I should have liked a similar one for my dear Anita, who is forced to wear one that she made herself from bits of old curtains. We do not have much to spend and must

limit ourselves. I wear shoes that I patch and sew myself. Two different odours emerged from the shiny new slip of the vendor: one of unwashed flesh and one of a costly, voluptuous perfume. 'These girls are reserved for the Allies,' I said to myself. And I could imagine that they both spent the morning in the Piazza del Monte cheating buyers by selling at ten times their cost padlocks which cannot be found elsewhere. Then, towards noon they go home, eat better than I, sleep for three or four hours, or read one of the numerous weeklies which are the delight of human imbecility; then they dress, put brilliantine on their lice-infested hair, and finally towards evening, when the beautiful September moon rises, they go in search of American soldiers to drink with them and bring into the world other Romans, pure as Romulus and Remus, sons of Rhea Sylvia and of the Allies of that time. I should like to ask these girls if their protruding stomachs bear Anglo-German seed or, I should say, German-English, for the Germans were the first to come, and in the switch from one army to the other a vessel already moistened with German liquid was again impregnated. It is lucky that nature does not confuse the issue. But it is better that German or American bastards be born, rather than Roman bastards of the blood of the Borgias or the Farnese, or of others too numerous to mention.

In the Piazza del Monte were the same thieves who

had been there the other day. I hurried to the Via dei Baullari. It was not true that carters arrived there at six or seven o'clock in the morning. In Rome everything is always done with at least a half-hour's delay, so that the carters arrive at eight o'clock, the hour at which white-collar workers start their day. Then some of them go to work. Others lounge against the buildings, smoking, sneering, and making fun of the passers-by.

The bread ration for intellectuals like us was and is (German or American makes no difference) the minimum; but for porters, who obviously do less work and who are more carefree, the ration is the maximum. And this, too, is a reaffirmation of demagoguery! It is illuminating indeed to see that the identical standard was established by three successive demagogues: first the Fascists, then the Germans, and finally the Allies. According to the standards of these various demagogues, I who spend the entire day cudgelling my brain at a desk need but few calories, while a carter who sits all day in the sun needs a great many more! I who earn nothing because I am an intellectual (have you noticed, intellectuals are excluded from every programme, from every political speech?) am given only a small ration, while porters who can take advantage of so many opportunities, who earn money hand over fist now that moving from one place to another costs a small fortune, are granted the maximum ration. This is not democracy. This is a farce, a farce that humiliates

democracy itself. But we shall see if things can go on in this way.

I did not want to stand idly in the Piazza del Teatro di Pompeo under the eyes of the gangsters who were posted there, or of the various passers-by, and so I decided to enter into conversation with a bookseller. He was one of those booksellers (usurious old men!) who buy for ten lire books that they sell for a hundred. They acquire them from dissolute students or from the heirs of gloomy old bachelor professors, or from boarding-house keepers who sell the yellow-backed novels of adventure left on the tops of dressers, or other novels favoured by young newlyweds. These are the people who make money in Rome, where money is made not by intelligence but by trickery, just as it is everywhere else. It's all in knowing on what to speculate and in selling for all that the traffic will bear. If you decide to speculate in books, old books, don't think that you can change trades overnight and become a dealer in old books. The bookseller knew me, and I knew him to be an impertinent, fraudulent, grasping, implacable old man. The first thing that he does when someone approaches his stall is to get rid of him as quickly as possible by answering invariably: 'I haven't got it!' Or, if he once had the book asked for, that he has already sold it. After this exchange the only other question he will answer is, 'How much does it cost?' To this he replies that it costs a fortune.

Therefore I hesitated to approach him. But I needed

an excuse to stop, and so I spoke to him. Naturally, he already knew about the theft of the bicycle. Nevertheless, he asked me, 'Anything new?' After a few preliminary skirmishes of questions and answers, I asked him if he knew anything about the honesty of the carters. He replied that he didn't. Then, looking like a fool, as one always does when reporting a personal theft, I tried to toss the matter lightly aside. But the bookseller, who at first had pretended to know nothing about it, interrupted me.

'And why did you leave the bicycle outside the store?'

'What the devil?' I replied. 'Because the little shop over there is small. I had barely time to put the bicycle down and ask about the shoe polish when the thief . . .' And so on, to the end of the story.

'Well, what did you expect?' The book vendor was unmoved.

'Lucky you've never been robbed,' I said.

He bristled. 'Everyone robs me—from honest customers who often slip a book under their coats to sneak-thieves. Two of these, in fact, a couple of weeks ago, stole two crates from me, leaving behind the books that were inside.'

I understood perfectly. The thieves of Rome have no desire to steal books. Crass ignoramuses that they are, they assume that because books cannot be eaten they are worth nothing. The bookseller told me that the second night after the theft of my bicycle two bundles

of laundry as well as an automobile tyre had disappeared from the same cobbler's shop. However, the bundles did not belong to the shopkeeper. They belonged to a refugee who had left Rome three days ago. Note that the theft from the bookseller was not of books, only empty crates. The cobbler is not robbed of shoes, but of laundry that does not belong to him. It is only too plain that shopkeepers and thieves know each other, and do not interfere with each other because of mutual interests. Otherwise, how could pseudo-honest men and a band of thieves live together long in this crooked piazzetta, named for the meek Pompey. It is very likely that the eight or ten shopkeepers and tradesmen around the square know well enough who are the members of the gang; and that everyone except them is robbed. A shocking example of solidarity.

While these thoughts were running through my head I became more and more certain that the bookseller could have told me, had he wanted to, where my bicycle thief could be caught. I had thought that I might catch him in this square among the carters; but if he was there I did not see him. I turned over in my mind what I remembered of his appearance: the sallow face, eyes too close together, broad, flat nose; and, characteristic of his breed, the short white woollen socks, and sandals made from the belts of the Fascist militia or some other military order.

In order to draw out the bookseller and pass the time, I started a discussion of politics, in which he was passionately interested. Although I know very little about it, I had enough knowledge to make him listen. At a certain point I mentioned my doubts regarding the devaluation of the lira.

Our debt, I was saying, must be far greater than six hundred billions, or fifteen thousand lire *per capita*, or fifteen-hundred-lire tax to be paid by every citizen. If that were all, it wouldn't matter. Instead, the value of the lira will nose-dive as it did in Austria and in Germany after the First World War. The value of the lira will collapse all at once, or almost all at once. At that time in Germany it took fifteen days. I was in Western Austria, at Seebach-See, near Klagenfurt. I remember, I went on to say, that one fine day I saw a different flag hanging from the balconies; and almost at the same time as that flag was unfurled I saw a few children who, from the top floor of a house, were throwing paper marks by the handful to other children who were shrieking in the street. Since the mark had become worthless, nothing remained for those who owned marks but the bitter pleasure of giving them to children so that they might amuse themselves by wrapping up sweets. I can still see the gaily coloured marks floating in the bright air.

The best way to make someone talk is to cut him to the quick; and now the bookseller, the usurer, pricked in his chief interest, sordid avarice, asked me a series of

questions. I willingly answered them, and while I answered a drama unfolded.

I saw my bicycle thief again! He had come out from an alley and mingled with a group of young ruffians whom I had been watching while I was talking with the bookseller. I recognized him; and he saw and recognized me, but feigned unconcern. Hands in pockets, he started to talk to his companions. Near him was his brother. No one told me it was his brother; but they looked alike, except that the other, his senior by about five years, was of the same build, although differently dressed. What was I to do? I asked the bookseller:

'Do you know that young man's name?'

'Which one?'

The bookseller pretended not to know or recognize him. He became reticent and tried to evade the question, but I pinned him down. Had he replied that he did not know him, I could easily have asked someone else for his name; perhaps the cobbler, who, if he were a decent person, would have told me. Finally he answered that he thought his name was Pappa.

'And that one there, is that his brother?'

'Yes! How did you guess it?'

'Are they honest?'

'Honest!' the bookseller replied jeeringly and with a touch of annoyance. 'They run that little furniture shop down there.'

As a matter of fact, the group was standing around the entrance to the shop. One of them talked with assumed gaiety to the others. As for the thief, Pappa, he kept his hand in his pocket and said nothing. He put on an imbecile look and exchanged glances with his brother—their way of communicating. What was I to do? There was no policeman in the little square. Had times been different, I would have shouted 'Stop, thief!' But under these circumstances it would have been useless. I had, luckily for me—I shall explain myself later—witnessed the appalling scene between the couple on the one hand who had been robbed in church and the people who had banded, not against the mother of the little thief, but against the two honest people! There was something to be feared in revealing oneself as an honest man.

At this moment a woman and a man went by, quarrelling loudly. The woman was thin, young, and down-at-heel. Her legs were sunburned, dirty, hairy, but not ill shaped, and her body seemed ravaged by venereal disease. The man, with a sickly smile, was trying to get away as fast as he could from the screaming girl.

'You rat! You swindler! I'll tell your wife! Send her to me, I'll tell her a few things!'

My thief took advantage of the confusion, as did his companions, to vanish into the crowd that had unexpectedly assembled. I jumped on my bicycle, and in

the wake of the crowd I started to follow, with difficulty keeping my thief in sight. Pappa, noticing that I could still see him, turned to one of the group who had stood with him in front of the second-hand furniture shop and gave him some directions. The latter was pushing a bicycle with a light blue mudguard. I had to choose between following Pappa and pursuing the other thief on my own bicycle. I chose to follow the latter. It turned out to be a good idea. Now I knew that the thief's name was Pappa, and that he kept a dirty little shop in the square. I also knew that he had a brother who looked like him. In addition, I knew that there was no point in depending upon the absent police—absent throughout all Rome, as I shall explain further on. Nothing remained but to obey an inner voice that advised me to follow this other thief. I hoped that he would not notice me and so I might be lucky enough to accompany him to the bicycle cache. A real stroke of luck, but not to be hoped for, would be for the thief to reach the cache and take my bicycle out to hide it somewhere else. Or at least for me to succeed in locating it. Even at the risk of being knifed, I would have started to shout in order to attract a crowd; and perhaps among so many people there would be a policeman. I had a knife in my pocket, and the receipt for the stolen bicycle to prove that the bicycle was mine. Then, once a crowd had gathered, we should see what would happen.

Pappa's companion turned off through the Piazza del Palazzo della Cancelleria, crossed the Corso Vittorio Emanuele, to the Via dei Leutari, and from there, pedalling slowly, without ever turning around, because he had not noticed that I was following him, crossed the Via del Governo Vecchio, then the Piazzetta del Monte Giordano. At the turn of the Via del Panico he stopped, pretending that something was wrong with the bicycle. He tested the chain and, looking round, saw that I was following him—he would have noticed anyway when he reached his destination. I put on my brakes, went slowly through the Via della Campanella, turned and went back, and so managed to be behind him again.

He stopped at a bar on the left side of the Via del Panico, went to a telephone, and tried unsuccessfully to put through a call. Meantime I pretended to watch a vendor who was roasting chestnuts over hot coals. I bought three, for which I paid three lire. While he was in the bar the thief beckoned to his companions and made angry gestures in my direction as he spoke first to one, then to the other of his confederates. I noticed that he had left his bicycle outside the bar in the deserted street, carelessly sure that no one would steal it from him. In order not to attract attention and so give him reason for attacking me, I bought the *Vedetta Repubblicana* and pretended to read it. The *Vedetta* had already accepted some of my articles and was publishing another one. But the thief noticed that I was not really

much interested in the newspaper. As a matter of fact, from now on every pretence on my part was futile.

Now that the man knew that I was following him, he could not remove my bicycle from its hiding place—which I had a feeling was just a few steps away, perhaps in the rear of a shop or an out-of-the-way corner. There are bicycle vendors who, saying that they don't handle stolen goods, make it understood that they do it as often as they can. While I was thinking of this probability, the thief got on his bicycle again and made off in the direction of the Via del Panico along a stretch of wide and deserted street, which at one point contained the lowest houses of prostitution in Rome. Even the most indifferent passer-by whose thoughts were far from amatory pursuits saw behind imitation wooden gratings painted green, women with their breasts exposed, leaning on the window sills. Their breasts, of the consistency of yeast gone bad or like the shrunken udders of old cows, rested on worn-out little red velvet pillows.

When my man had reached the beginning of the deserted street, he suddenly turned upon me and threatened to beat me up. I noted the ample circumference of his open hand. It was an enormous hand. Tufts of hair stood on end like the feathers of fighting-cocks, while his eyes looked like those of a beast of prey. The situation was both laughable and frightening. I took one step back and did not lose my head, for

I knew that gangsters are cowardly and seldom act when there is one against one. He was a coward, typical of his kind, which never attacks if the sides are equally matched. There was no point in being afraid yet, for so long as the fight is just between two men, it is an equal battle, and battles, no matter how ferocious, are acceptable. They represent the crucial moments of our existence. One cannot reasonably expect or hope that our lives, all enshrouded as they are in our poetic dream of love and justice among men, will flow along smoothly and serenely. It is useless to dream of such a life and stupid to hope for it.

I made no reply. I waited for him to make the first move; but he only shouted, then roared, then threw himself on the ground in a fit of hysterics. It was obviously an act put on to threaten and intimidate a victim, and at the same time a call for help from any of his pals who might be in the neighbourhood.

This was hardly a new experience for me. I had been assaulted and beaten more than once by the Fascists. The first time was in Pola in 1927 and the last in Rome in 1942, when I was leaving night school at ten-thirty one evening. But my guardian angel has always protected me, and I have never come to any real harm.

He was shouting, 'What do you want, you coward? What do you want!'

'Nothing,' I said. 'You started all this. I'm trying to find my bicycle.'

He got up. 'What do you mean, nothing? You bastard, do you think that I've taken your bicycle? I don't give a damn about your bicycle! Go to hell!' And he poured forth a torrent of abuse.

I remained unmoved, eyes alert, ready to defend myself. I let him shout.

He did not strike me, because his object was to make the others gather to defend him. He was shouting simply to attract a crowd, as cowards do. The mob has always acted like this and always will: they attack only when they happen to be at least five against one. However, the thief knew that I had a knife. The others had told him so after they had seen me cut the string hanging behind the saddle of my bicycle in the Piazza del Teatro di Pompeo.

In less time than it takes to say it, about ten thieves and spectators from the Panico had gathered. And here I was—I was thinking to myself—this time an actor in a scene similar to the one I had witnessed as a spectator in front of the church when the purse had been stolen from the elderly couple. In the crowd which began to gather I recognized five young ruffians as having been among the thieves of the Porta Portese.

They began to hurl abuse at me. 'Louse! Son-of-a-bitch!' And they accused me of all sorts of crimes. As I remained calm they were at a loss to know what more to say, for my innocence was manifest and they had run out of insults.

If the most belligerent of them did not call me a

thief, it was only because being thieves themselves left them open to the obvious reply, 'Birds of a feather.'

Finally I said, 'It is my right, my friends, to get back a bicycle which was stolen from me.'

A spectator, one of those people who, in an argument between thieves and honest men, like to put the honest man on the spot, said: 'And you've come to look for your stolen bicycle in the Panico? You fool!'

'Where would you go to look for your stolen bicycle?' I retorted. 'In the Vatican? In the Quirinal? I have been looking for it everywhere, and I'm not bothering anyone, nor have I any intention of doing so.'

'Go look for it in the Palazzo Braschi!' said one of the thieves nastily, because, as you know, the Palazzo Braschi was the headquarters of Roman Fascism.

Another, having heard 'Palazzo Braschi,' remembered that he had been a squadron member, a Fascist soldier, one of their bullies. Now that times had changed, he was enrolled in other parties but still showed the same aggressiveness. He shouted: 'Get out! Fascist!'

And another to whom this was old stuff: 'Go on. We know you're a Fascist! We've seen you parading around!'

This was impossible, not only because I have never been in a parade, nor ever will march in one, but because at the time of these parades I was not in Rome, but at Merano in the Alto Adige.

They thought that they had really struck home. And now the crowd that had swelled to fifty was shouting deafeningly in my ears. I managed to remain calm:

'Fascist! Is that so? Like you, then, since at least nine-tenths of you Romans were Fascists. If I were a Fascist, would I have been sent into exile, imprisoned? I fought against Fascism when it was dangerous to fight against it! It was far more useful to fight against it, then than to talk about it now.'

'You? In prison?' said one of the mob, shaking his fist in my face.

There is just a split second between the threat of a blow and the blow itself, but it is time enough to grab the wrist of one's assailant and hope for the best.

Another of the gang, surprised by my calm, said: 'What do you mean, when you were in prison? Do you think we believe that? Why don't you leave us alone? You're not a politician. You're a spy, a Fascist. Get out!'

He really believed, poor fool, as did the others, that I was lying; and that was why they were all so set against me.

Another said boastfully: 'You an anti-Fascist! I was one. I stayed in the Via Tasso!'

I saw a chance to turn the brawl into a farce and said sarcastically: 'You in the Via Tasso? Where? And when? For a walk? That must have been it! Or else you collaborated with the Germans and served as a cook for the squadron.'

It may have been true—I don't know; but this had the effect of a pail of cold water, and he stepped out and said: 'What do you mean?'

'Just what I said,' I replied. 'Do you want to see my papers?'

'Take it easy,' said one of the spectators at this point. 'Let's see his papers!'

Hearing this, I felt that I was safe, because all I had to do was to take from my pocket the copy of the *Vedetta Repubblicana*.

'Here's one of my articles! Do you see it? Here's my signature! Here's my identity card. Aren't they the same? Am I myself?'

Luckily I had in my pocket the red booklet given to those who had been put in confinement. The crowd began to divide into opposing camps; but I was already safe, because those who were after my blood, and who were probably well known by most of the hundred people now gathered around, were no longer shouting. Others, meantime, were jeering and giving advice.

'Leave him alone!' some were shouting. 'Knock him down!' came from others.

'You have a fine idea of liberty and justice!' I said, laughing. 'You want to lynch me if I am not a republican, or a socialist, or a communist, or an anarchist. Suppose I belonged to a party that you'd never heard of. Suppose I belonged to the pacifist party, the only party that should be in existence after this war. The republic is either bourgeois or pacifist——'

'He's trying to muddle us,' said someone who was certainly a muddler. 'Knock him down! Knock him down!'

But this threat gave me strength. I began to shout that in Russia such savagery against a man who was looking for a stolen bicycle could not take place. As a matter of fact, such scenes probably do take place in Russia. But I kept on, telling the thieves in the Via Panico that in Russia everyone lived in peace and had enough to eat, that in Russia there were no thieves, and that there one could not steal with impunity. And I added that things had come to a pretty pass when honest men and thieves co-operate.

After I said 'thieves,' not one of the five or six present said anything more. Instead, they tried to read my article as best they could.

At this point a *carabiniere* appeared, just one; and he was very small and very young.

He too began to pick on me: 'Get out, I tell you! Get out!' And he took me by the arm. Turning to the crowd, he said, 'I'll take him with me!'

He was doing this to save me. But woe unto me had I gone with him! I protested and warned him not to touch me, because I was a republican and didn't give a damn for the King, and the people were right. Everything was the fault of the King. He was the cause of the general misery! So I managed to talk myself out of this difficult situation; and the young *carabiniere*, mortified,

retreated into the crowd, muttering against me. Then some of the spectators of the brawl took me into custody. These were the republicans. The thieves vanished, the crowd of curious disappeared, and there I was, unexpectedly alone on the Lungo Tevere, after having shown my card to the republicans, and after the disappearance of the thieves who returned to their dingy homes in the Via Panico.

The thieves had won the skirmish and left me unarmed—or so they thought—threatening me with the worst if I continued to search their streets for my bicycle. They might have persuaded me had I not discovered their lair at the end of the street, at the right as one looks towards the Ponte Sant' Angelo.

As soon as I was alone, I thought of trying another experiment, the next to the last one, the one that at first had seemed to me the only stupid one: to turn to the police. I don't hate the police, but neither do I like them. I have never been able to stand them. I have always detested them. I began to do so when I first came into contact with them many years ago; and I still dislike them, for though the Italian police are being reorganized they are still as corrupt as they used to be.

I was twenty-three or twenty-four years old before I had any contact with the police. Then one day in Ancona I ran up against them. This was during the

First World War. As an artillery officer on leave from the front I was on the way through Ancona when I stopped in that small fishing port to wait for a car that was to take me back to my parents' house in Macerta. At noon I had gone to a restaurant and found it full of officers. I didn't cut a very imposing figure since I was still in the uniform I had worn at the front, but the other officers were all gaudily dressed, even to makeup and perfume. Each was talking gaily with two or three cocottes seated beside him at a dining table. I had felt a little disconcerted, like a brother who, returning home, is given a cool reception by his family in answer to his warm greeting. Even those who had answered me had busied themselves immediately with their plates, filled with good food, while the others had turned their heads away so as not to look at the badly dressed guest, the poor laughable man who almost arouses pity in even the youngest strumpets. Then, after the first bewilderment, I had started to eat and finished my meal in a great hurry.

The waiter, standing in front of me, was waiting for me to settle my account when suddenly a senior officer came into the dining-room. Everyone stood up, even the cocottes. The officers saluted while their girls wagged their tails like ecstatic little bitches. It was probably in the fraction of a second it took me to leap to my feet and snap to attention that the waiter slipped my wallet out from under my hand—I had taken it out

of my pocket in order to pay the bill. When I sat down again it was gone.

With trembling hands I frantically turned all my pockets inside out. I looked everywhere, under the table and on the chairs. While this was going on, the waiter remained unconcerned. I asked him, my cheeks burning, to go with me to the owner of the inn. He followed me at a distance and perhaps gave the wallet to another waiter, an accomplice, or more probably to one of the cocottes for whom he acted as pimp. The proprietor did not seem at all surprised at the theft of my wallet. He only showed annoyance at the incident and asked me not to make a fuss. As for settling the bill, he asked me if I had no other money with me. As I had none, not even a coin, he asked me to leave him my ring and watch as security.

After this I went, full of hope, to the nearest police station; but, as I have said, I did not then know the police. It was half-past one. A policeman told me that the assistant chief would not be back before four o'clock. Then I asked him to let me see the chief. He asked me who I thought I was: didn't I know that His Excellency did not receive everyone? He received—the policeman emphasised the point—only people whose cases were extremely serious and urgent, or cases handed over to him by his assistant. I explained my case as best I could. It was serious to me, but the policeman began to laugh. He listened to me as he roamed through the corridors in search of something to smoke. Naïve as I was, I did

not yet understand. It was then that the policeman himself asked me with honeyed words if I could offer him a packet of cigarettes. As I gave him the three or four that I had, I noticed that he was looking at my silver cigarette case. Since I had insisted upon waiting for the assistant chief in the little room—a dirty little hole, a pigsty, typical of all police headquarters in Italy—the policeman allowed me to sit down, while he started to pace up and down in front of me. Finally he said unpleasantly, after he had smoked all the cigarettes that I had given him: 'Perhaps you expect me to lend you some money? Ha! A lost wallet? What is a lost wallet? You haven't any other money? That's too bad. I can take you to someone who would lend you some!'

I protested, and the policeman began to make fun of me. Being very young, I finally said that his was not the best way of coming to the help of an honest man, of an officer, of one who was on his way back from the front. Exasperated by my remarks, shouting insults, he seized me by the arm and dragged me to the threshold of dirty, crumbling brick stairs that looked like those of a brothel. Then I hazarded a remark which I admit was not very respectful to the government's administration of justice. At this point the policeman unexpectedly became tough, threatened to send in a report against me; and as I, being young and hot-headed, retorted angrily, he very nearly went beyond the threat and had me thrown into prison. While all this was taking

place, the waiter at the inn was probably dividing up with the trollops the money he found in my wallet.

The police station I went to is no cleaner than the others. The stairs leading to the entrance are not well lighted, as they should be, but dingy and dark. On the ground floor a policeman stretched at his ease in a broken-down chair, like a sheep that is dozing while its nose rests on a manger.

I asked where I might leave my bicycle so that no one would steal it from me.

'Surely not here!' he replied sardonically. Nor would he permit me to leave it in the guardhouse.

'Where, then?' I asked.

'I don't know. That's your look-out!' he replied.

He used the familiar *tu* in talking to me, as though we were old friends; but I paid no attention to it, because he was doing it through ignorance and not through malice. And the remark about its being my look-out betrays the basic sentiments of the police. Justice, which should resolve everything and arrange nothing, that is, leave nothing uncertain—our depressing previous state—merely says 'That's your look-out' when one is at police headquarters.

I looked at the little courtyard and asked: 'Would my bicycle be safe here, do you think?'

'I don't know!' he replied more sardonically than ever. Then he said immediately, waving his fist, 'Watch

out!' And again, 'That's your look-out!' (He was afraid of being liquidated, which was why he replied even more rudely than he would have normally.) Prudently, I went into the courtyard to attend to the bicycle. But as I had to relieve myself I went to a corner of the courtyard, and did it with symbolic pleasure. On the opposite side I noticed a pipe; and I leaned my bicycle against it, securing it with two padlocks. Then, after I went up the stairs, I found myself in a room that looked out upon a gallery. In the room were about ten policemen, all idle. I knew why they looked disconsolate. Their gloom was due to the fear inspired by the Purge Commission and the Allied Control Commission, for they had on their consciences the fact that at the time of the German occupation they had willingly, for five hundred lire, joined an execution squad for partisans, anti-Fascists, and other innocent victims of the Nazis.

I asked the policeman, 'Where is the chief?'

He gave the usual jeering answer, 'He's not here!' then turned to a sergeant: 'Sarge, do you want to listen?'

But the sergeant was even more dejected than the others. I said:

'I want to tell you about a serious incident. It's not simply a matter of a bicycle theft, which would be nothing, but about an uprising that took place in the Panico after I had caught the thief.'

The remark attracted the attention of a few policemen, but the sergeant remained impassive, as though he had not heard. Meanwhile other policemen came in:

‘Did you hear? They almost took our hides off!’

I asked one of them who was hovering about me, hoping perhaps for a few cigarettes if not something more, what had happened. After a certain telephone call from some bigwig in one of the ministries, he said, two policemen unable to dodge the assignment had been sent to accompany a bailiff, or rather to see to it that he didn’t get beaten up in an eviction case. But when the policemen appeared on the scene and went into the apartment that was to be cleared, the tenant began to protest. He stuck his head out of the window and shouted ‘Help!’ The usual crowd of people armed with sticks gathered and ran towards the two policemen who, pious even in peril, were now saying that they owed their safety to the Madonna of the Carmelites, rather than to their fleetness of foot.

Here was something more than a bicycle theft! How could these policemen listen to me if some of them were busy planning their defence for Lord knows what accusation of the Purge Commission, and others were thanking the Madonna of the Carmelites for not having been mobbed? All this awoke in me more pleasure than any comedy I could see on the stage.

I had already forgotten my stolen bicycle and was about to leave when a third policeman appeared. He stared at me oddly for a moment, then put his hand on my shoulder like a friend.

Wait a moment, I said to myself, but without conviction. Wait, he has arrested my thief, or perhaps he has found the bicycle!

Not on your life. He was a police agent from the old political division of the Piazza d'Armi, my former district; he had recognized me as the man he used to shadow, and he probably wanted something from me.

'Well?' I asked with a certain show of surprise.

'Don't you remember? I shadowed you, dear professor, for years and years. You must be an important man now. An anti-Fascist like you cannot now be anything but an important man! How many snows and rains I have had to endure because of you! And how many precautions and warnings I have had to listen to! I can well say, though I say it badly, Why aren't you an important man? Why are you here? In the days of Fascism our order was to report day by day when you went out and when you went home. You were considered an enemy of Fascism, a dangerous subversive; one who kept up a correspondence with exiles. You haven't been called yet? Surely you are on some commission! You can help us! We're poor policemen! You see our condition, and how badly we are treated! Nobody likes us any more—we're between Scylla and

Charybdis. Give us some help. But what are you doing here? Your bicycle was stolen? Which one? The blue one or the aluminium one?’

He knew my bicycles as well as I, because the police can find out anything when they want to. In the meantime the policemen began to take an interest in my tale and gathered in a semicircle around us. I was forced to repeat the story of the theft. And I chose my words carefully in order not to appear, before their crass ignorance, less skilful than a policeman in describing a theft.

The other policemen, understanding that I had been considered by the Fascists as a dangerous subversive, one who was particularly to be watched, all dared to hope in their heart of hearts that I would do something for them; and they all showed that they were convinced that I must have become an important man in this anti-Fascist era. Indeed, I noticed that some suspected that I was in their midst for an investigation, and that my stolen bicycle was just a pretext. The fact is that the sergeant began, with the speed of a hippopotamus, to move his little eyes and wrinkle his forehead.

‘Ah, Pappa! We know him!’ he said, breaking the fence and turning to one of the policemen.

‘He’s the one who——’ said another, winking at something that I knew nothing about, some other misdemeanour of Pappa’s. But a third policeman nudged the others to make them keep quiet, which

made me realize that policemen know all the thieves in Rome; and that they want to do nothing to make it difficult for them, for, worse yet, they want to live like good neighbours. They never reveal to anyone who wants help who the thieves are, their names, where they live, what they do, and what jobs they have thought up in these times of terror. So much terror that no one in Italy knows any longer what peace is! And they don't want to arrest anyone.

At this point a little man came in through the small door at the left. He seemed even more preoccupied than I. He confided in me, without any urging on my part, and, what was worse, made charges in my presence against the police. He said that he was the owner of one of the houses near the Via dell' Anima and the Piazza Navona.

It is a house that has been done over, situated in an alley which opens up on the Piazza della Chiesa di Santa Maria della Pace, a pleasant bit of architecture by Pietro da Cortona. The little man had rented the various floors to honest or seemingly honest persons. Some of them, during the German occupation, had gone away, while others had remained. Those who remained had arbitrarily occupied the floors or the apartments of those who had wanted to go or had been obliged to. They had forced the doors, put aside or relegated to the cellar the furniture and household

belongings of the lodgers who had left, while the new lodgers had placed their dirty old beds in rooms they now rented by the hour to whores and soldiers. In other words, they had converted a private house into a sort of house of assignation where an old harpy superintended the management, the food, even the clothes and the payment of the girls. And this, naturally enough, was not to the taste of the owner of the house. The fact came out that he had several times asked for police intervention.

The police had demurred as long as they could, and finally the little man had come to ask that two policemen accompany him to protect him while he evicted the whores and the harpy. It was to be a most entertaining eviction, because the eager soldiers who were protecting the harlots were attempting to prevent it. Police intervention was certainly required. But the chief of police was away, and the little man was waiting.

Waiting is always long and always irritating. It is then that time stands still. Other hours seem to pass like meteors. They pass without our noticing it or without our succeeding in doing anything worth while. But if some delays appear to be long, those that must be spent in the corridors and antechambers of police officials always appear to last an eternity. It seems then as if time were at a standstill, and as if its wheels, which are eternal, were bewitched. We become nervous, even if we have never been nervous before. Besides which, a

visit to a police station is never made in perfect calm. It is made either because we are summoned there—and then a thousand suspicions, a thousand hypothetical crimes come surging uncomfortably back—or because we have a complaint to make and need help. And in this case too we are not at ease.

The man was prey to a nervous agitation and was letting off steam in speaking to me; he had already repeated his story three times, varying it each time. He was like a bullfinch singing in a cage. He modified it so much that he was finally taken in by it. I listened to him the first time unwillingly; then the little man succeeded in capturing my interest in his tale, especially when he described how one of the whores, half naked and wearing mules, had gone out into the street to quarrel with him. Now he was telling me that another had threatened him and, from her fourth-floor window, had tried to throw some water of doubtful purity on his head as he stood in the street. And all the while she was taunting him and making fun of him. And now he was assuring me it was a great scandal. He told me that he had two little girls: one was too young to understand, but the other, although still a minor, understood perfectly; and for the sake of morality and his daughters he intended to bring the scandal to an end. Besides which, it appeared that the old harpy did not pay the rent, nor did the former lodger pay him. The little man had become the butt of scorn and jokes. 'A scandal and nothing earned!' he kept repeating; and this excited

him so much that his face could not have shown it more.

‘And you, what are you doing here?’ he asked suddenly.

I had to tell him that it was because of the theft of an aluminium bicycle.

‘A bicycle?’ he replied. ‘But in Rome four to five hundred a day are stolen!’ I had unwillingly given him ammunition and encouraged him to complain about the police. I had limited myself to deploring that in the actual contingencies there were no specially appointed groups to do away with the scandalous theft of bicycles.

‘I tell you,’ the little man started again, ‘that policemen and officers are miserable wretches. They live on human flesh like lice and fleas. Sometimes they become rich, and then one can say that they feed their children the blood of others. One fine day they may also notice, like Bocchini, that it is better to stay behind and plough the soil or to follow, fist clasped about his tail, the ass returning from the Avellino mill laden with two bags of ground corn meal. The police are damned by nature, or they were until a short time ago. They were insensitive and tough; they absorbed the tears of others, and finally the only licit and possible amusement for them was to smother their own remorse by keeping themselves entertained with prospects of causes for even greater remorse. One nail drives out another. They took pleasure in listening to tales of woe and

laughing when poor wretches became flustered before the judge, lost their composure, burst into tears, while they told tales of having become victims of oppressors.'

The little man, who was obviously out of his mind, continued: 'Knowing all this, you can imagine how reluctantly I have asked for police protection when I needed it.'

'Some one like Tizio did well for himself,' I said in the hope of persuading this restless man to be quiet, 'and I understand, from those who believe that gangsterism is the only way of getting ahead, that a Tizio knows how. He was lucky enough to have friends and relations; he was born fortunate, with money in his pocket or with influential relations—perhaps even both advantages. You cannot suppose that in Italy you can get ahead with intelligence only, intelligence which ought to be synonymous with kindness and moral rectitude. In Italy it is thought that intelligence and genius only bring unhappiness.'

'Everything, then, is obtained through gangsterism,' replied the little man.

After this, he was permitted an interview with the police chief who, as usual, shrugged his shoulders and made him understand that he could do nothing for him. The interview did not last more than ten minutes. The man went out in an even greater fury than he had come in. It was so great that he even forgot to say good-bye to me as he left.

When it came my turn, I explained my case, which was not just simply a bicycle theft, but an uprising of thieves. I also told of their attack on an honest man, who had succeeded in escaping once again and had managed, through his wit and at great risk to himself, to track down a bicycle thief all by himself.

The chief proposed having Pappa brought in. But what good could this do? Pappa would not come alone: this being an emergency for his gang, he would appear with a whole company of fellow thieves.

So then, if Pappa and I were confronted with each other, what would happen?

I should insist that I recognized in Pappa my bicycle thief; but he would deny it and would bring with him false witnesses, companions and members of his gang who would present some kind of alibi. On the other hand, what counter alibis could I bring? None! None, because yesterday and the day before I had carefully studied the thieves' stamping ground. I had seen their worst terrain. I had even gone so far as to question the cobbler, who had insisted, lying in his teeth, that he had not even noticed the bicycle thief, so that he certainly would not be in a position to recognize him. All this was highly suspicious, of course, because I had pointed the thief out, exclaiming: 'Look at that thief's face! Excuse me a moment while I put my bicycle in your shop!' Everyone in the little square had seen the thief escape.

Now, I remembered one detail that at first had seemed unimportant: a little old woman who, when I was bemoaning my loss, pointed with a trembling finger and said, 'Look there.' Her 'there' I had interpreted as the direction of the Piazza del Monte, while instead it meant the direction of Pappa's little store. What was I to do? Go back and find the old woman? We all know that old women are afraid to speak in front of the police. Even the wind makes them tremble. They behave like turtles: as soon as they feel the wind on their faces, they retire inside their shells, eyes shut tight.

Of the other people present, who would be able to support my accusation? The carters? No, surely, because if they had wanted to they could, then and there, have pointed out Pappa, the manager of the little second-hand furniture shop. They saw him every day. And indeed the carters are at one with thieves since their sheds for mules, horses, carriages and carts are on the Via del Mattonato, where, as I have said before, a gang of thieves is in permanent residence. No one, in fact, would testify in my favour. It was easy to picture what would happen: Pappa, in front of the police, would pretend to lose his temper. The commissioner himself would tell him not to inveigh against me, but to take legal action against me if I persisted in accusing him of being the thief; and I should have to leave the police station. And then what? His fellow thieves, already gathered in front of the police station, would

try to mob me. Frankly, it wasn't worth the risk of losing my worthy skin for a bicycle. Better save it for some other occasion.

On the other hand, what can you do when the police chief can't help you, even if he wants to, when he cannot order his men to shadow Pappa or put any of his men at your disposal? You assure him that in the Via del Mattonato there is a hang-out of bicycle thieves, and that near there—you indicate the place—are hoarders of stolen bicycles. But the chief neither arrests the culprit, nor even makes inquiries. Perhaps he and his men know better than you what goes on in the Via del Mattonato, the types and habits of the thieves there and in the Via del Panico; but he lets you take your own chestnuts out of the fire.

The chief's proposition could have ended by being extremely dangerous for me, and would not have helped my search at all. The denunciation would have accomplished nothing, and would have given me new cause for annoyance and have been the reason for other useless risks.

Considering all this, I took my report and said that I should have to copy it and correct it, which I did. I removed the thief's name and thus gave the police the not too embarrassing choice of either striking out at Pappa by using their own information (two policemen had already said they knew him as a thief) or filing my report away among the useless reports of innumerable other bicycle thefts

Suddenly I took my watch from my pocket, clasped my forehead, and exclaimed: 'Absent-minded fool that I am, I had forgotten that at twelve-thirty I was to be at the offices of the weekly *Aurora*, and it is now twelve-fifteen.' And so I left in a great hurry.

I was just about to go down the stairs when a young policeman caught up with me. He had shown more solicitude than the others in listening to my case, although he had not spoken a single word. Respectfully, fawningly, he stood in front of me and said:

'Will you do me a favour?'

'How do you expect me to do it if you don't tell me what it is?'

" 'Let's talk on the stairs.'

I did not understand at once what motive he could have in wanting to speak to me there. I looked at him with surprise. He explained that he did not want to be seen by his colleagues, because he had something private to tell me; something that concerned only him and his son. I was already on my guard. Had not the little man who was having trouble at his house exclaimed: 'Police-men always have one last stratagem, one last trick up their sleeves.'

The young policeman opened a door which revealed a flight of dark stairs. In the dark there was a woman who appeared to be beautiful and young, standing behind another door with glass so thick and dirty as to be almost opaque.

The policeman introduced the woman to me as his wife, and the fake husband then began to speak to me of a fake son. Or perhaps it was true that he had a son. Just as the guard who had shadowed me during my stay in Rome at the time of the Fascists, from November, 1938, to 1943, had called me 'professor,' in the same way this policeman now spoke to me of his twelve-year-old boy as a father would speak to a professor. He had sent the boy, who was to take certain examinations, to the Tobiollo Institute for private lessons, wanting to speed up his courses. The boy had been at Bari last year—Bari which, just between you and me, is a city of fools. They thrive there. Even the shores of Greece, which are not too distant from Bari, shelter fewer fools. His wife meanwhile was smiling sweetly at me and, even before I opened my mouth, said that I was right. She spoke a perfect Friulian dialect. Here was a man from Bari who had married or taken as mistress a woman from Friuli. This was odd, because he was not really fool enough to choose a faithless woman in order to exploit her, nor was she sufficiently weak-minded to allow herself to be exploited by only one man.

With a fiendish glibness, the husband, or fake husband, tried to make me go with him to his house in order to meet the boy.

I wanted to get away, as I always do when I have had to go to a police station or to court. Nonetheless, I continued to answer their questions somewhat excitedly,

now with a Yes and now with a No. But that charlatan from Bari had me cornered with his endless story about his son, paying no attention to my obvious hurry. The boy had been in Bari during Badoglio's time, which naturally meant that we were dealing with an anti-Fascist whose son, because he had been at Bari during the disorders of the liberation, had not been able to keep up with his studies, and who intended to catch up and possibly go from the first class to the third.

'What do you think of it, professor?'

'Would the professor come to our house to see the boy?' begged the woman, who was smiling at me more impudently than I have ever been smiled at by any other shameful and complaisant woman who was disposed to surrender herself and let the rest take care of itself.

'Don't insist. It isn't possible. The professor is in a hurry!' objected the husband. As though the decision rested with him he went on to say, in order to make me agree: 'I cannot possibly leave here until this evening at eight. As a matter of fact, professor, I cannot even leave these stairs to accompany you to the courtyard.'

And once more the woman, hoping to convince me that she was well disposed and that a close relationship with her would not cost me very much money, asked me about the Tobiola Institute.

I left the police station and pedalling through the Via della Scrofa, the Via Ripetta, the Lungotevere, I reached my house. I decided to put off my search for the bicycle, at least for the time being, because matters had become complicated. Only I shall never find it again, I thought mournfully to myself. At this very instant, perhaps, the thieves are dismantling it or they have already done so on the advice of some policeman. As a matter of fact, the police chief had indicated this possible danger by saying: 'Let's do this. We have a stool-pigeon whom we may be able to use. Let's see, anyway. We'll do the best we can to get your bicycle back!'

Surely by now they have dismantled it, piece by piece, bolt by bolt, screw by screw, I continued to lament. And to-day they will begin by selling one of the handlebar grips, and to-morrow the other. Or perhaps they won't even do it this way. Now that they are warned of my skill at finding things that have been stolen from me, they will sell parts of the bicycle, piece by piece—not to-day nor to-morrow, but who knows in how many months, and who knows where! Can you after a year remember the colour and shape of the handlebars of a bicycle that has been stolen from you? And yet I should be able to recognize even a fragment that belonged to my bicycle. One can do anything, but, with a police force that does nothing to stop thieves and perhaps even shows them what they should do, you may as well give up all hope of finding

your bicycle again. In extreme cases, they may keep the thieves in hand in order to use them against anti-Fascists, if the Fascists should return, or against the Fascists if the anti-Fascists stay.

I remained uncertain; and I may say that I had almost resigned myself this time to the loss of my aluminium bicycle for which I had paid fifteen thousand lire. At one time a bicycle cost fifteen thousand centesimi, as to-day it costs fifteen thousand lire. But the fact is that to the poor man fifteen thousand lire is always fifteen thousand sweated lire, especially in stormy times. Besides which—and perhaps this is the heart of the matter—to any man who in his turn, without the label of a thief, robs someone else, and who now earns fifteen thousand lire a day, to him fifteen thousand lire represents only fifteen days of labour, and he can adapt himself easily to the idea of the loss. Fifteen days more, fifteen days less, it is all the same.

But copyright laws have never been really enforced in Italy, and to the poor writer fifteen thousand lire means now, just as it did in the past, the labour of writing seven books or seventy articles for the inside page of a newspaper. There actually are publishers who, even to-day, still have the barbaric courage not to pay him more, and not to give him the rest of his commission. Or they give him an advance of two thousand and no more, the excuse being that the book has caused

difficulties of a political nature, or that booksellers have not paid them, and so on. The excuses on the part of publishers are infinite, and so the poor writer wears out one or perhaps two pairs of shoes, shoes that are worth at least ten thousand lire a pair, dashing from one editor to another in an attempt to peddle an article, spending meantime another thousand lire in bus fares. In the end, the shoes and the bus fares and the paper (which costs a small fortune), plus the ink, which can be found nowhere except in the black market, and finally the typist, cost more, when all is said and done, than the book or article brings in.

The worst of it is that everyone, from the typist to the cobbler, tells us poor writers: 'Don't do it! There is no point in doing a job that does not pay!' The black market does not even consider attaching a price to intellectual labour, nor does a demagoguery.

I decided to waste some more time in trying new means to recover my fifteen thousand lire by finding my bicycle, and I set myself the task of writing a book about this *nth* disgrace. I have never resigned myself to losing anything until I have beaten my head against a stone wall, to prove to myself that the loss was irremediable. It is also true, as far as finding things is concerned, that up to now I have found two of the five bicycles that were stolen from me during my three years of residence in Rome.

The first bicycle was stolen one night from my room in the studio of the Via Oslavia. My model, whose name was Assira, in collusion with a lame woman from Serramarengo, a section full of thieves, albeit in my beloved March mountains, and her husband, an oil thief, broke into the room. They needed a bicycle to go to Viterbo and Sabina, to the oil market. He was my model's lover, and he in turn lent out his wife, who was lame but very beautiful, with black hair, brilliant eyes, a clever tongue, marvellous breasts. She betrayed her husband enthusiastically and was an excellent bedfellow. Her legs weren't much good in bed, but I didn't look at them. I looked at the rest, which was extraordinarily graceful. The two women showed the oil thief where I kept my bicycle, through pique either because the model had not been paid by me except with small gifts and outings in the country, or because the lame woman had been vexed by my having become soon tired of her. The three came to steal it either in the evening or very early in the morning, taking advantage of the fact that the building was the size of a small country village, with its long flight of stairs and its courtyard which was thickly planted with tall shrubs. The doorman, who had too much to do, was careless like most other Roman doormen. The dishonest trio found a simple way of letting themselves into my studio where, with a pick, a lever, a hammer and pliers, they easily shattered the door lock.

The following morning the imprudent lame woman came to me in my studio, showering me with kisses and caresses. I wondered at her return after I had thrown her out rudely, either because I knew I could no longer satisfy her, or perhaps because, and this is true, I have never been able, even though I am as a matter of fact extremely virile, to satisfy a woman who does not please me completely or of whom, for some reason or another, I have become tired. The fact remains that I was no good that morning either, and in order to get rid of the importunate woman I decided to go out.

I accompanied her to the street and then planned to go for a bicycle ride alone, far away into the country, to lie in the sun and perhaps shake off my bad humour. The lame woman tried to persuade me not to go for my bicycle. 'Please come with me on foot to the Piazza Risorgimento!' But without having any cause for suspicion, I already suspected her, not knowing why. One never knows what a disappointed woman will do. Suddenly she had lost her temper with me. She was very nervous. I thought that, even if I consented to accompany her to the Piazza Risorgimento, there would be no point later in my coming back on foot; better to return on the bicycle. I therefore made her wait while I went to the shed for my bicycle. But, wonder of wonders, when I opened the door of the corridor that led to the shed I noticed that it had been broken in. I rushed in and saw that the bicycle was

gone. Then, still on the run, I went down the corridor back to the lame woman, who was waiting in the courtyard. She seemed unabashed and quite indifferent about the mishap, nor even remotely surprised by the fact that the room had been broken into. She showed only a certain almost imperceptible anxiety to return home quickly—this too made me feel that I was right to be suspicious of her. On the other hand, only she and Assira, the model, knew that I often left my bicycle in the shed rather than carry it up to the seventh floor every day.

I asked the lame woman to leave me because I had to look into the matter. In such a case there is no point in wasting time turning to the police with denunciations or requests for help: one must manage by oneself, and the simplest way is to try to obtain another bicycle at once, so as to run after the thieves. Two years ago it was easy to do this; and I was lucky enough to get a new one at a reasonable price from the owner of a storage house for bicycles from a big Milan factory. Luck was with me. The owner was about to leave town to do his military duty. I began to go through all the streets of Rome on my new bicycle, or, to be more accurate, I proposed to go with my new bicycle in search of the old one through all the streets of Rome. I began by circulating in those parts of Rome where thieves are most numerous and in the Trionfale Quarter and the Regola section. I was going to start roaming about in the streets that were near those of Porta

Cavalleggeri, where the model, the lame woman and her husband lived.

I remembered, as a good observer remembers everything, that one evening I had accompanied the two women to their little hovel, and that Assira had stopped to talk with a bicycle vendor on her street. While we were passing he had winked at her, and Assira, in order not to betray the flirtation she was carrying on with him, had greeted him and stopped to exchange a few light words. However, it is easy to guess the nature of a relationship between two people, especially between a man and a woman. He was obviously having an affair with Assira. She already had a lover, one of the numerous kind who close their eyes to whatever their women do. It was plain that the girl had friends among the old barbers and innkeepers and sausage vendors, who gave her wine and cheese in return for her favours or, being unable to give her anything else, made presents to her of perfumes and soap. Perfume, for a girl who is poor, is a gift more precious than bread and cheese.

Still on the track of my bicycle, I began to hover around the model's house. First I asked casually if she had been seen going off on a bicycle; but everyone said No. Then, on some pretext, I went into her house. It was a hovel with broken-down stairs. One of the rooms was a kitchen similar to the one in Patini's painting entitled 'The Heir.' The beams had been blackened by smoke, and the walls were the colour of a ham rind.

A packing case served as a table, and two smaller ones were used as chairs. There was no longer a wooden door in the passage between the miserable little bedroom and the dirty kitchen.

Perhaps Assira, during a winter night, had chopped up the door and burned it as firewood. That's what the poor do. They break up everything. They destroy everything within reach when they are hungry. They would destroy entire forests in order to heat a can of water and cook a fistful of corn meal. I once saw a few of them loot the apartment of a rich gentleman. They broke the glass doors of a china cabinet containing several sets of dishes, among them a complete coffee service, a dozen little cream-coloured cups of painted Japanese china that were extremely beautiful, a coffee pot, and a sugar bowl. But the destructive poor, the vandals, did not have sense enough to distribute the loot so that one would have the entire coffee service, another the dessert set, another the tea service. Oh, no! They divided everything, so that one had only two coffee cups, a teaspoon and a lemon squeezer; another, four coffee cups, two teacups, and so on. It would have been better, if they could do nothing better than steal, to steal at least logically and methodically, so that the sets were not broken up.

Although the door was no longer there, in the very middle of the kitchen was an enormous old tomato tin into which a small brother of Assira was preparing to relieve himself. I asked him:

'Where is your sister?'

'I don't know!'

'Where has she gone to?'

'I don't know!'

'And your mother?'

'I don't know!'

'And you. what are you doing here alone?'

'I don't know!'

'Aren't you catching cold?'

'I don't know!'

'This is too much!' I shouted impatiently. 'Don't you know if you're cold? Get back into bed and stay there quietly!'

As a little dog, with his tail between his legs, goes back into his dirty kennel, so did the little urchin go back to his dirty covers. Did I say dirty? They were foul. They had the appearance of a striated, stained and varicoloured geographic map. The sheets, if one can describe a shredded strip that is unravelling as a sheet, were without a doubt the most tattered rags that can be imagined on a miserable pallet. And yet it was on these that the beautiful Assira, whose body was perfect, whose light eyes contrasted with a halo of black hair which formed a lovely frame on her temples, had lain, while making love ardent as a mare, and who was unable, when she was modelling, to remain still more than a few moments at a time. Without asking permission, she would jump down from her platform or get up from her chair and run to kiss me. If one is

really a painter, one does not always want to be kissed by a model who, by breaking her pose, interrupts a certain lineal and plastic spell.

But why did she rob me? I was asking myself as I helped her brother to cover up with the filthy blankets. Why?

It was a naïve question. The lover in me did not understand it, the novelist did. She had robbed me because she was hungry, because of the misery, the overwhelming misery, which was in this house, and also because of the obligation to obtain a bicycle imposed upon her by her disreputable lover, the husband of the lame woman. How could he have gone in search of oil to Viterbo, or perhaps even farther, without a bicycle, or, to be more precise, without the money to acquire a bicycle? It is true that he dealt in the black market, but oh, the black market! How many poor men and women have I seen in the black market who looked as though they had grown rich there or had been on the point of doing so and then had suddenly in these tragic times—this is not an exaggeration—plunged back into poverty worse than at first? And how many girls had there been who had sold me in the black market fish and sausages, real little sausages from Norica, or from Fabriano, or from Ascoli Piceno, sent by the faithful of Rome in homage to the Holy Father? They were stolen from the Vatican trucks as they travelled through dangerous streets, laden with food solicited for the poor Romans languishing under the

German yoke. Occasionally someone helped himself to a small basket or to a precious string of little sausages which ended up, some of them, in my famished gullet!

Being unable to steal without a bicycle, the lame woman's husband had urged Assira to help him, and she had given in.

That this was not a case of professional thieves was proved by the fact that a bolt, a hammer, and a pair of pliers had been used just to shatter a lock. Without any noise and much more quickly and effectively, the lock could have been opened with a picklock: which, for the benefit of those who do not know, consists of a simple piece of wire bent at right angles. The end of the short side is flattened out a little, and there is your picklock. I myself would know how to use it. I saw a locksmith use it once when I had lost a key and did not know how to open the door without forcing the lock; he opened it easily with his gadget. Besides this, the three thieves had been afraid, which also demonstrated that they were not professionals, because real thieves operate with a calm like mine when I write my articles, without erasures, or like that of a surgeon when he sinks his scalpel into infected or diseased flesh. My thieves had acted with such haste that they left the pliers on the floor, under the small bench in the hall. They had left them almost as though they had started to run after they had stolen the bicycle. I had picked them up and put them into my brief-case. Now I took them out and asked the little boy:

'Do you see these? Your sister left them on the stairs. I picked them up and am returning them to you.'

The boy looked at the pliers and naïvely replied:

'Those aren't Assira's. We have no pliers. They're the lame woman's.'

When I insisted upon knowing why the lame woman had them or how he knew they belonged to her, the little boy pointed to one of the ends of the pliers: it was much shorter than the other because one day it had been broken in an attempt to break open a case. The little boy was no longer saying 'I don't know,' but prattled away. He did it naïvely or because, with incipient slyness, he was hoping by his chatter to get back the pliers that belonged to the lame woman who was a friend of his family. I was not obliged to return them to him, but the child, with the excuse that they belonged to a family friend, insisted on it. He started to cry when I said that I would not. In order to soothe him and to find out where his sister was, I said:

'I'll give them back to your sister. Tell me where she is, and I'll go at once to give them to her!'

And so he told me that Assira had left the house with the lame woman, and that he knew nothing more.

Where had the two gone? The lame woman had been with me at about eight o'clock in the morning. Then I had spent an hour buying a new bicycle. After this I had gone to Assira's house. In the meantime the lame woman had hurried to her house to warn her

husband of my suspicions about them. Unfortunately for him, the husband had run to the cyclist who was getting ready to make my bicycle unrecognizable. Now, things being as they were, it was not difficult to find Assira, the lame woman, and the bicycle dealer. He could only be one of the three or four who had shops in the neighbourhood of the Porta Cavalleggeri and the Vatican railway station. Bicycling along, I came within fifty yards of the first bicycle shop. I pretended to know nothing and approached him with my best manners. I already knew that bicycle glue was no longer being sold, so that I could ask if he had it without running the risk of having to buy any. I should not therefore look like a fool by asking for something and then refusing it. •

‘Have you any glue?’

He did not even answer. He knew that he had none, and that it was impossible to find. And mentally he sent me to the devil. He did not waste time in replying, which was just what I wanted, because, while I was waiting, I looked to see if my bicycle was in sight or, in case it had already been dismantled, if around me on one of the benches was a pedal or a wheel or a handlebar that belonged to it. When this first inspection was completed I went to another shop and engaged in the same pantomime.

To make a long story short, I went around the three or four squares and through about thirty streets, all in vain. Finally it occurred to me to go to the bicycle

dealer who had made a pass at Assira the other evening. If you have never experienced the joy of finding something that was lost, such as a wallet or a dog, I hope you will. I'm not wishing you any bad luck, which would be unkind, but I hope that you will lose your dog and will experience the happiness of finding him again. The joy is such that it increases the value of the object lost. It is also a sentiment into which enters in great part the gratification of our vanity. After feeling like a congenital idiot unable to look after your belongings, good for nothing except to admire ecstatically Anna Stickler, you suddenly feel as though you were no longer creeping about on the ground, but swinging along on horseback. And I started to shout joyfully:

‘ ‘Here's the thief! I've found my bicycle! Here it is. It's mine!’

Breathless and mad with joy, I dashed into the bicycle shop where a boy was dismantling my bicycle. He had already taken off the large rear basket that I had added because it was so convenient for carrying my paintbox, canvas, easel and canvas-stretcher when I went out into the country to paint.

He was removing the dynamo, a Marelli, and the electric lamp. There are a great many Marelli dynamos, but mine had a vermilion-red stain close to the wheel which I had never taken off because I thought that I might some day have to recognize my bicycle, piece by piece. I knew exactly what the sprocket looked like; I had jotted down in the little memorandum book that

I always carry in my wallet the registration number of the bicycle; the black-out glass of the lamp, I had made myself with a little piece of black paper. But—this was the thing—under the saddle in a crease in the leather I had written my name with an indelible pencil. So, all in all, it was the easiest thing in the world for me to prove to the crowd that had already assembled that the bicycle was really mine.

While all this was going on, two policemen, the last of the crowd, arrived. Oddly enough, they started to pick on me for having made it possible by my shouting for 'the thief to get away.'

'But what thief?' I replied to them. 'The shop owner isn't even here!'

The two policemen showed their extreme annoyance^o at my having attracted a crowd by my shouting, although it should be perfectly obvious that if I had not started to shout the crowd would not have gathered. This is what probably would have happened: the bicycle dealer would have appeared, have given his customary signal to the policeman behind my back, the promise of a bribe, and the following scene would have unfolded. The two policemen would have dragged me and the dealer to a police station. Meantime, another bicycle would have been substituted for mine, either in the shop or even, with the help of accomplices, in the very waiting-rooms of the police station. Then I should have been accused of being mad, insolent and stubborn, and of being a slanderer besides. And the dealer would

have drawn up a complaint against me, backed with false testimony that I had insulted him, and that I had attempted to beat him.

I should have had to pay the court expenses, and I should have avoided ending up in jail only if, first, I had found a good lawyer; secondly, I had passively put up with being accused of madness; thirdly, I had resigned myself to apologizing to the dealer in stolen goods; fourthly, I had the case struck from the records. All this in addition to the loss of time and the bad humour arising from an honest man's tangling with so unbelievable a concept of justice! I didn't object too strenuously to being regarded as a fool, if I could get my bicycle back by shouting like a madman, 'Help! Help! Help! Help!' Anyway, how many times under Fascism had I saved my skin from the so-called Fascist censors by pretending to be mad! Actually, being good-humoured and resigned, my impersonation of a madman was quite convincing. The important points were, first, to be anything but crazy and, secondly, to find the bicycle and hold on to it.

The dealer gave no sign of life. Perhaps he had run away to hide. I took back the bicycle and said to the two policemen that I had no intention of reporting the incident or filing a complaint against the dealer. This was only to make it possible to take my bicycle home, for I had the one I had just bought to cope with as well.

For a while I pushed both of them. Then, tiring and not being able to ride one and lead the other, I thought of stopping in St. Peter's Square. There are always pilgrims there who want to go somewhere else. Not that there aren't thieves also, but it is much more likely that the latter are the natives. In other words, I did not trust myself to ride the bicycle that I had just found. A boy, being more agile than I, could have pedalled away at breakneck speed through some half-deserted alley and disappeared, with my bicycle two minutes after I had found it again! That would have been something, and I should have lost the deep satisfaction of being able to boast that this was the second time that I had found a bicycle. No one would have believed that such a thing had really happened in Rome. I should just have been credited with an unmerited cleverness in embroidering upon an ordinary story.

So I decided to walk home with both bicycles.

Having no intention of letting the thieves get away with this, I went to a police station and swore out a warrant for the dealer's arrest. I was closeted with him for several hours that evening. As I have already said, the police were not functioning perfectly at that time; but at least they did do something. I had put in a complaint against the dealer for accepting stolen goods. He was defending himself, maintaining that he did not know the person who had come to him and left the bicycle, not for dismantling but for repair. It was pointed out to him that he should have had an orderly

register of clients. He didn't have one and swore that he never had had, but that this did not prove that he received stolen goods. On the other hand, I was convinced that Assira and the lame woman had brought him the bicycle to have it camouflaged. I extended the complaint against them, and they were arrested or rather taken into custody. We were confronted with each other. The lame woman said she did not know the bicycle dealer; but Assira, questioned separately, had to confess that she knew him. As a matter of fact, she added that he had introduced her to the crafty lame woman. When the lame woman's husband was also arrested, he started to quarrel with her then and there. It was quite a scene.

Then he was brought into another room, where I tried to make him believe that his wife had already confessed. But he was not taken in. Confronted with his wife, he asked what she had said; and the lame woman, who made a cuckold of him with everyone, retorted, 'What a fool you are!' The husband pretended to take this in bad part, as though he had been betrayed for the first time and were not happy in his rôle of a cuckold and not accustomed to idleness, to spending in a bar the money which he managed to extort from her. Actually he was a satisfied cuckold, for he was tired of his wife and didn't care whether she did betray him. He, on the other hand, was doing the same to her with Assira, nor did he care whether Assira betrayed him. The lame woman, let me repeat, was beautiful; but she

tired quickly in bed because of the leg which dragged instead of staying still or moving in rhythm. But she was so beautiful, pleasing and exciting-looking, that the Commissioner of Public Security had already planned to get something out of her; and the husband, who had noticed it, was resigned to the idea of this latest cuckoldry. However, he had thought his wife's remark to be out of place. Then he insulted her; she slapped him, and a battle ensued. I was laughing, but Assira was serious. However, afraid of being hit by the lame woman, she did not attempt to separate the combatants. The policemen just stood around, watching only to make sure that the two did not hurt each other too much; that the husband, for example, did not hurl his wife against a table corner. During the struggle a note fell out of the lame woman's underwear. I picked it up and read it with curiosity, not suspecting that its contents would be the following: 'Two thousand lire on account to [the lame woman's name] for the bicycle which she sold me this morning for four thousand lire; the remainder to be paid when the following shall have been removed from the bicycle: the basket and the dynamo, which are to be replaced by new ones.' There followed the buyer's name and address.

He too was summoned by the police; but, clinging to the good faith of the missing dealer, he said that he had acquired the bicycle without knowing that it had been stolen, and that the lame woman and Assira, who had accompanied him to the shop, had been the ones to

indicate where he might go. The buyer, having paid the money, could try in this way to make his purchase legitimate and pretend to be in good faith.

In the meantime, everything had been put down in writing, and the bicycle dealer and the lame woman and Assira were about to be put into jail. Assira, while she was being questioned by a policeman, had flown into a passion. How well I knew these! She could shower insults upon you with the greatest ease. She had told the policeman that he was 'a dog in the manger,' and a 'lecher.' In revenge, the Sicilian policeman had unexpectedly slapped her. The slap was so hard that the imprint of four fingers was already beginning to show red on her face. When all has been said and done, I thought to myself, the woman who was responsible for all this damage has now been sufficiently and justly paid back. Why make her pay more? I finally came back to my senses. In my first rage I had wanted it to be made quite clear that the husband had thought out the idea of stealing a bicycle, any bicycle, the first one that he could find, that the lame woman had suggested robbing me; that Assira had accompanied them to my shed; and that the bicycle vendor had acted as receiver, knowing perfectly well that he was accepting a stolen bicycle (which was why he had been unwilling to confess who had brought it to him). However, now that all this had been established beyond the shadow of a doubt, what was the point of being cruel and vindictive towards these poor people? I had, after all, committed

adultery with the man's wife as many times as I wanted to. Assira had served me more or less well as a model for an etching of bathers in a river. She is the one in front with her back towards the spectator, showing her broad, pear-shaped buttocks, her black hair, her slender waist. I had never given any presents to the lame woman. The only one against whom I still bore a grudge was the bicycle vendor.

At this point I remembered that he had replaced the old dynamo and old basket with new ones. He had not yet put on the new dynamo, but he had removed the old one and had brought the new one to the police station to try to prove that, since it was not my dynamo, the bicycle also could not be mine. He could hardly tell the police that the dynamo had been removed to be replaced with a new one. For this reason, either because he was trying to get into my good graces or because he forgot to ask for his property, the new dynamo was already in my pocket. So each one of the thieves had in some measure paid for his crime.

But above all, my sense of poetry, my unconquerable feeling for celestial anarchy, which has always prevented me from taking a complaint to court or asking for a condemnation, prevented me from wanting to hurt the thieves. I am always joking! I am the sort of man who knows as well as the saints and better than ascetics or hermits that human existence is only a brief passage. We come forth moaning from the unknown, still dripping from the foetus, and return into the

unknown, dry-eyed and fed up with the comedy that we have been forced to play while alive. Try to tell that to an infant who is being baptized, upon whose tiny pink bald head the purifying cold water is sprinkled. Go and prophesy to him that some day he will end on the gallows or before a firing squad, that some day he will take to wife a lame woman who will betray him as often as she can! Go and tell him, go ahead! Or tell him that the little mite, all wrapped up in a soft silken mantle, after having become the head of a ministry or of a government, will end his days in the mud of public disapproval!

Certainly no one would come into the world of his own volition if he knew what vicissitudes lay in store for him, what misfortunes and griefs he must overcome.

And overcome them for what? Does the man who suffers the most live the longest life? On the contrary, he lives the shortest. There remains the philosopher's consolation, which is worth more than a philosopher's education: the consolation—in the words of the sybaritic citizens of the Marches—of 'a little garlic,' or of that fresh humour akin to the scent of garlic which can be expressed by the wit of a writer. But it is certain that not even this art of writing is an art worthy of Adam, of the poetic myth of creation! One should live and not bend over the page to crowd it with little symbols which dribble from a pen dipped in black ink. We ought not to spend whole days bent over a page to

reflect in it our griefs, or laughter over them, writing the tale of our misadventures more for ourselves than for others. Now that I am almost an old man, introspection is pernicious for me. I am doing what retired generals do at the end of a war that has been honourably fought: I am writing my memoirs. I am also writing of the present political situation; but that is too painful, too important to me. Besides, it is very seldom that a writer can influence the decisions of his contemporaries, especially in our unfortunate Italy. We have become mummies; we have almost stopped living in order to tell a tale. But I, I did live once! I lived the divine anarchy that thousands and millions of men who are now living in the cities lack the courage to live to-day. I never bowed! The only recourse left to me was to flee, and so I fled in order not to lose anything more. But I acquired more than I should have supposed possible before my flight, before I had acquired possessions. In the woods which became my hotels I acquired peace, true peace, which in my case was the privilege of apparently doing nothing, yet actually consisted of looking with ecstatic eyes to see whether or not tender stalks of grain would nod in the wind. They first waved vigorously, then softly, then lay in immaculate peace.

One can spend hours, days, an entire spring, watching them. Now and then a bee or a butterfly or a drone comes to rest on them. The bee's name is Assira; the butterfly's, Anna Stickler. Perhaps I am the drone.

But not only golden beetles and butterflies, but the entire universe is behind these stalks that nod in the wind.

Thinking of the lame woman, what broke my heart was something I had not yet thought of: she had been away from her children for as much as a half-day, locked up either in a cell or in a room with a policeman. She had two: one who was old enough perhaps to understand that her mother was, among other things, a thief and might go to jail; the other, a baby, might even now be crying for his mother who was in prison.

Why don't judges think of these things when they pass judgment? Whence comes their cloaked impassiveness? It is not in a court of law that causes are settled. The human cause is alone and unique, and should be resolved humanely as it is in nature. Look at nature. She is our mother and teacher. Although we recognize her original and fatal errors, we never swear at her. Nature condemns, but she is not implacable. She does not act coldly like human judges. Nature punishes, but she does it only in order to correct. Look at a man who drinks too much. He becomes an alcoholic. If he does not stop in time, of his own accord, Nature slowly punishes him. She is also cruel, but she is much less so than judges, who chop off heads or have them chopped off, which comes to the same thing, who have people shot or shoot them themselves, which comes to the

same thing, who segregate human creatures and send them to languish in jail. And the judge cares nothing whether or not the human beings straighten out. Whether the criminal repents or not, the repentance neither counts nor helps much with the dispenser of sentences, whose actions are based upon a code which is no different and never will be different from straight 'coercion.' And, besides, the fault of one single individual is the fault of all. Before becoming an oil thief, the lame woman's husband had been a house painter. He earned money, and so did not need to steal. Every thief is only an occasional evildoer. And anyway, who is not a thief? I myself, O sainted Nature, do I not rob you a little of your spirit? From Assira I have stolen something, leaving her love aside—a notion completely unknown to her—which might be less so if ever a man should enter her life to straighten her out and educate her; but I have stolen a few hours of her days.

I was on the point of falling into the opposite extreme, as happens to me quite frequently, of believing that all the others were innocent, and that only I was guilty. The fact is that I know myself well, and I know how thin are the patinas of sanctity. No one is a saint. And no one has ever been one, because saints are not born, they are made. St. Benedict of Norcia, St. Philip Neri, became saints. No one is a saint who has not been a devil. Beware the impassive, impossible models of

good conduct! Trust me, for I have been devil enough!

After I had come to these conclusions (thoughts are flashes, but words are elephants), I looked for a way of unburdening my conscience. It was ridiculous that I, who had taken such vigorous measures against the poor thieves and against the fence, should be the one to beg for their release and for their return home. However, I succeeded.

The police headquarters stank of the usual filth, as well as of beans that had been burned in the bottom of a kettle. I don't know how policemen manage to live in their surroundings, and how jailers manage to do their work. I asked, with the absolute certainty that I should cut a very poor figure, that all—thieves and bicycle vendor—be given their liberty.

I was sure that the policemen would think me a fool; but they too are children of God. One of them, when he understood that all four scoundrels would be freed, and that he would be spared the job of watching them at night, rubbed his hands happily. He laughed at me, understandably enough. The chief of police also suspected that I was mad.

Perhaps I am really mad. But don't tell me so. Don't take from me the happy illusion that I am wiser than you. Let me be true to myself, to my poetic spirit. Try to follow my line of thought. If more people did,

governments would become weaker, slighter, unsubstantial, shadowy. And indeed governments as well as police should be like shadows; light shadows that escort pilgrims along the bridge between the state of not yet having come into the world and that of no longer being in it. Shadows! Or, if not shadows that comfort the weak and the tired, let there at least be governments that are kind to them, that look after the sick, shelter the pariahs, protect the defenceless, educate the ignorant, control tyrants. The best way to stop them, to control these only real great beasts of prey, is not to hit them in the belly but to bring them to a stop with smooth-working brakes. Governments should weigh little; they should be light as flies over a table covered with crumbs and sugar; they should hover like butterflies, placed there by Fortune, over a garden. They should not be, as they are, like wasps and snakes.

But to come back to my recently stolen bicycle, I was uncertain whether to let it go, this time giving up as lost a handsome aluminium bicycle that I used to refer to as my 'silver bicycle,' or whether to make one last attempt to get it back, at whatever cost. A barber who was half joking told me that one means of getting back a bicycle is to steal another one! All Romans are rich and sly, so that, on losing a bicycle, they don't care whether or not they find it again, for all they need to do is steal someone else's. All I needed was a modicum of courage, to post myself at a street corner next

to a beauty shop or a shoe shop, for example, and there wait impudently and patiently for another person, as careless as I had been, to leave his bicycle while going into the shop, leap on it, and pedal away! No one would have pursued me more than twenty feet. Rome is so large that there is little risk of recognition here. But, Heavenly Father, to start being a thief after fifty years of a simple and honest life, naïve and poetic in its straightforward virility! After fifty years, why start? It is true that in the large capitals of the world nowadays men are murdered for fun, to see how successfully it can be done. However, we are now like the Arabs in the desert who, in order to steal a pair of shoes, will kill a fearless hunter who, for example, has gone alone from Ghemines to Soluk to hunt for drakes at nightfall. The other Arabs, in hiding, kill the hunter either for fun or because they need his shoes. But thieves are thieves and Arabs are Arabs, and up to now I have never been a thief.

What other honest way was there of getting back my bicycle? I was in the dilemma of one who has always found his bicycles. Finding things again can become an entertaining pastime. So I thought hard. I thought of approaching the thief and politely trying to persuade him to give me back my property. But what do thieves consider good manners? They steal not because they want to keep the objects stolen, but because they want to sell them again and pocket the money. They steal just for the sake of stealing, because

they consider it a trade and every trade has its own reward.

In my case I had to get close to Pappa and speak to him courteously. But how and when? He disliked me, and I disliked him. The scene in the Via del Panico had not been violent; but it had developed into a brawl, and there was now cause for worry when going through this street.

Then I thought of Florinda, a girl I knew, the daughter of a butcher at Cosenza in Calabria. She had been in Rome for several years, having become, like many girls, tired of the restricted peasant life at home, eager for love, and full of animal lust, a real bacchante.

Such girls, wearied by years of the narrow life of country spinsters, and secretly bemoaning their lot, start making love in their own village without their parents' knowing about it. Seducers can always be found. There is no small, primitive village that does not boast of or censure (according to its moral standards) four or five irresistible, good-for-nothing young men in whose arms women and ignorant girls throw themselves headlong, quivering with lust. It is while they are tender and inexperienced—while they are still quivering—that it is easiest to possess them. It is enough to pass several times through a girl's little street, look up at her window, know how to strum a guitar, wear a geranium, and have the courage at least,

when necessary, to face a beating from her father. And how many resentful fathers are there to-day? Very few. Those who watch carefully over their daughters are even rarer. Everywhere now, even in the once proud and savage Calabria where a knife was frequently used to settle a vendetta, all that many fathers and mothers want when a daughter has reached the age of eighteen is to get rid of her. After all, birds do the same. Mother and father bullfinches lovingly and carefully build nests. The father bullfinch is present when the mother lays her eggs. After the eggs hatch and the little bullfinches, featherless and trembling, come out of them; after they have grown wings, feathers, a tail, and have become strong enough to fly, their parents decide that their young are now able to take care of themselves. They take them by the beak, put them on the edge of the nest, lift them up by their wings, and then throw them out of the tree.

In this way little bullfinches first learn to fly. Their wings quiver as they spiral through the air; they fall and beat their wings, with their breasts resting on the grass. But they soon get up and, in less time than it takes to tell about it, they are able to fly, masters of the world, and, more or less, themselves. If animals do this, why should the mothers and fathers of the Florindas do otherwise? I don't think that I could separate myself from my son or, worse, from my daughter; but I say this because my little Luciana is young. And alas, as I was told yesterday by an old lady, children are not

made for their parents. In simple peasant families a son after the age of eighteen can consider himself as the bulwark, the mainstay of the family; a daughter, on the other hand, is no longer good for much because after she has reached that age she no longer wants to herd the sheep nor weave the linen. All she wants to do is make love. So the parents become disgusted and let their daughters leave. They even let a daughter commit the first ⁴sinf of love. Then, if the lover is an honest man, he can be compelled to marry her; if he is only a seducer, they take advantage of the occasion to send her to Rome as a maid. And every twenty-year-old peasant girl yearns to become a city girl. She has already learned all she needs to know: that in this world the one who works hard will have only one shirt, the one who does not will have two. The best course for a beautiful girl is not to get married. Nowadays country girls also know that the surest way to have a good time is to have it before marrying. But how? How can a girl have a good time in the country under the eyes of a disapproving priest and cleft-tongued gossips? The difficulties and uncertainties are too great; better then to leave for Rome and become a maid there. Everyone knows that to-day it is the maids that are the mistresses in most houses in Rome.

They come into the houses, heads bowed, wearing wooden shoes; they leave with their heads held high, having become, after three months, the friends, the secret mistresses, of the masters. Under normal

conditions a society lady, after having worn a good, well-cut dress only seven or eight times, gave it to her maid because it was no longer the latest fashion. Servant girls are adorable in their healthy beauty, their well-shaped pink legs, and butter-coloured thighs. They are far more desirable than their mistresses—hysterical *habitués* of the movies and nervous readers of novels, who smoke drugged cigarettes, drink hard liquor, gamble. Servant girls think of nothing except making love. They find it convenient to go to market because it is there that they meet a sergeant or a petty officer. All this is common knowledge.

The fact remains that Florinda came to Rome and found a place as a maid with a lady just back from Addis Ababa with her husband. In Addis Ababa the husband had been a court usher, and this job, along with a few shady deals, had given him a handsome income. But evildoers sooner or later are called to account for their misdeeds, and few of them leave this world without having expiated their sins and given up their ill-gotten money.

His wife had arrived in Rome laden down with African jewellery. Florinda spent several pleasant months serving in a house where, except for a few clouds which always seemed far away, life was festive. The master of the house had become Florinda's lover. His wife knew it; but she pretended ignorance and paid him back by betraying him with one of the officers in the German Embassy. When the husband and wife had

spent most of their money, the officer advised him to enrol in one of the political training corps in Germany. The man who had been betrayed by his wife accepted with pleasure the opportunity to quit Rome and go to Germany, leaving his wife more or less as a hostage.

After he had gone, the officer turned the house into a semi-brothel, and it was perfectly plain that the wife was ready to act as a procuress. Perhaps in Africa she had become rich in just this way. Women who have been faithful from the very first do not suddenly become unfaithful. There are no two ways about it: If up to the age of thirty they have always been faithful, they will not suddenly change, except by a painful and unavoidable necessity. The officer brought other officers to the house, and for Florinda he brought enlisted men. The mistress of the house had her sister come from Turin. In order to keep up with her new master and her old mistress, Florinda persuaded a friend to share her amours, Maria Antonietta, the girl about whom I shall write at another time. It was through her that I had met Florinda.

I had known Maria Antonietta as a model; but Florinda enticed her away from me, flattered her by telling her that she ought not to be just a model, and advised her to come and live with her, or, at least to sleep with her—which meant nothing less than whoring. This was all that was needed in that house of ill repute. The nightly orgies staged by the four women and ten

or twelve men succeeded one another with increasing frequency. But one should avoid increased frequencies, for they lead to misfortunes. The women began to quarrel jealously, so that Florinda and Maria Antonietta were finally thrown out. The fault was chiefly Antonietta's because she was so beautiful. But her legs were imperceptibly crooked. Women with beautiful faces seldom have extremities that are equally so—especially legs. But her face was truly exquisite. It looked a little—and why not?—like a wolf's; but it was the most beautiful face in the world with its sharp little lines, an upturned nose, a small mouth, a tiny chin, with eyes that were always wide open and hair of a marvellously strange colour, between blonde and chestnut. I have not described her well, because her beauty defies description.

After the two had been thrown out they started to make the rounds of boarding-houses and finally walked the streets. They did not give themselves to just anyone, only to those who knew how to take them. In order to do this, one had to pay a great deal or be very young or be a handsome soldier or sailor. Their weakness was the navy. One sailor, for example, made Antonietta buy him a pair of shoes. Another sailor got Florinda to give him an expensive camera. A third received a savings book which he then took to a money-lender for an advance which he squandered, as well as the money which Florinda had given him to put into the savings book. She and Maria Antonietta went to

the movies every evening with sailors, and the sailors let the women pay for them.

At this time Florinda and Antonietta occasionally came to pose for me in my studio. As a matter of fact, they came for fun, when it suited their convenience. I certainly had not invited them. They came to me when they did not know where else to go, or when they could not work, or because, as often happens to whores, they were short of money or possibly completely penniless. Then they came to me and, after having posed ungraciously for two hours and eaten and drunk and rested, went away again.

Finally Antonietta, infatuated with an S.S. trooper, decided to enrol for work in Germany. She had never wanted to work, yet now she was enrolling as a mechanic. At least, I supposed that she went as a mechanic. In any case, I tried unsuccessfully to dissuade her from leaving. Florinda remained, making love with the Germans as rapidly as she could. Through experience she finally learned that whoring is a horrible trade. She grew cold, unresponsive, silent, and finally attained the status of a high-class cocotte.

And now Florinda continues to ply her trade with the Americans. She has rented a small room in the neighbourhood of the Via del Panico. The white-washed house in which it is located has clean stairs which are not frequented by babies. There are only two doors which open out on the stairs: the entrance

and the exit, on which are affixed elegant aluminium nameplates. It looks like a real house of assignation. There she reigns like a queen. She makes a great deal of money, as much as seventy thousand, a hundred thousand lire a week, according to her. She spends a thousand a day to eat, another thousand daily for shoes or stockings. American soldiers give her gold-plated rings or bottles of cheap perfume or things bought in the black market at exorbitant prices. Florinda accepts them all passively, tossing them indifferently into some box or drawer. She sleeps all day long. As a matter of act, she is just like a dormouse, pallid, squat, pert. She has the sort of bosom one associates with the Vienna of the eighteenth century, when life was like an Arcadian idyll and ivory-bosomed ladies wore powdered wigs.

I can imagine how the savage sensuality of the youngest soldiers must have been appeased by Florinda's soft, pillowy breasts, which I myself find revolting in the same way that a weaned infant at some point tires of nipple and breast. But because four or five years have passed since the soldiers saw their homes in Canada, or on the shores of the Mississippi, they are avid for even the most trivial love. They should be pitied, if nothing else. And how much worse it would be if they sent back to America the money they earned at the price of blood, at the risk of their skins! That's the most that can be said about them. For the rest, they are good young men, the normal companions of whores. I am

sure that they are not idealists, and do not understand anything of poetry or of painting, for example. They know about music-hall shows but are not artistically perceptive and sensitive as we are, nor can their minds encompass ancient and modern culture. They are simpletons who are taken in by the lowest whores, who allow even their handkerchiefs and their shirts to be taken away from them, as well as their wallets stuffed with occupation lire which we consider worthless. Poor, honest, hard-working Italians that we are, despite our artistic and creative genius, we are forced by fate to the lowest level.

So there was nothing to do but go and find Florinda. Rome is large, but everyone can be found if you know how to look. The essential is to ask Romans as little information as possible, because, if they answer your questions at all, they will lie to you. They do this not through malice, but through the refusal of every Roman, even the oldest inhabitant, to admit to himself and much less to others that he does not know Rome well and cannot locate every one of its streets. So it happens that the Roman will tell you to go left instead of right, miles from the street for which you are looking, which is actually just round the corner. Once in my youth, knowing nothing in Rome except its villas, its magnificent picture galleries, its famous monuments, which have all been written of in countless volumes, I was sent from Castel Sant' Angelo to

the station when I asked the way to the Via della Ferzza. Now I never ask anyone. I know Rome like the palm of my hand. And in certain streets I even know the shops and the people who can normally be found in them; not strangers, but those who have roots there.

I used to know a crossroads where Florinda (whom I shall call Linda from now on, the name she used when she posed for me) had taken a lodging to ply her trade. It is a hard one, as I have said, but she could find nothing better to do. She had been taken to the Via del Corallo by a girl well known in a bar of the Piazza Navona who, twelve days earlier, when English puritanism had all the houses of prostitution in Rome closed, had left hers. The old-time prostitute had gone to live with Linda. She had been living with a little woman who looked like a former hotel maid and probably since the German occupation, and anyway on the occasion of the coming of the Allied soldiers, had become a procuress, the owner of a private bordello. Only those who were known, or Allied soldiers, could enter it. The latter went there gaily, two or three at a time. They struck up a quick friendship with the girls, invited them to dinner or to one of the innumerable soldiers' clubs, the most famous of which will always be the Canadian Club, where good and visionary artists like me used to exhibit paintings, sculpture and etchings. A steady stream of girls flows through these clubs from evening until dawn. The stairs they climb are no longer sacred,

and now lead to the fine and original exhibit of prostitutes for foreigners.

I have not been inside it since it was reduced to a soldiers' club; but, to judge from what can be seen from the outside when bicycling by, there is a constant flow of pilgrims to Venus, a voyage to Cythera. Girls of all ages and degrees of beauty go up those stairs—even old waitresses, made as good as new with a series of more or less amusing fakes produced painstakingly by hairdressers, manicurists and pedicurists. In the midst of our present famine everyone believes that the best, the only way to eat is to approach soldiers. Then there is food and drink! Girls who, for months on end, have drunk no wine become intoxicated in a flash by just the fumes of alcohol. But, even though drunk, they don't forget to obtain from the rich soldiers happily steeped in champagne a bit of bread and sometimes a bit of chocolate for a little brother confused by the new code of morals, sitting alone before an empty table at home. There are all sorts of girls, big and little; children; married women whose husbands are away, either because they are prisoners or because they have gone over to the republican front. These are not widows; they are more than that, for they no longer have the firm arm of a man to stop them from throwing themselves into the bottom of the barrel of prostitution.

I know one woman whose husband began to lose his interest in working at the time of the Spanish War, and

lost the rest of it during the Ethiopian War. When he returned, he looked like a human wreck. Unable to work, as a result of ill usage suffered during the wars, he adopted the debauched way of life common to soldiers of all armies, of all times: living on money earned by a wife who has turned prostitute. The spirit of war is responsible for this evil with its hypocritical assurance that the golden age of the first inhabitants of the earth will return.

This survivor of two wars did try to find work again; but, either because he was unable to find sufficient wages to support his family by hard work, or because during the war he had learned how to steal, he became a thief.

- After having been elected wage collector by his office colleagues, he took all their wages one day and skipped out. Then he became a spy. Spies flourish like weeds in bad times and even more after the passing of tyrannies. As a matter of fact, the tyranny organizes them first, for they are essential to it. He had been a spy when the Fascist regime had gone to war for the *n*th and last time—this time to be destroyed so wretchedly.

When spring was past, when too much misery was revealed and Mussolini, now weakened, was unable to stem the tide of men and arms of the enormous Allied Army, our good-for-nothing husband, the long-time idler, the spy, could think of nothing better to do than abandon his family. He fled with the Germans and took refuge in the evil and jesuitical little republic

which had promised reforms it had been unwilling to establish in twenty-three years of demagogy.

His wife, left alone, continued to cuckold him. She had been doing so already, but only with important people, the brass hats, as has been customary in Rome, I believe, ever since Marius and Sulla, or rather Numa Pompilius, the good king who could not get along without the nymph Egeria or the ladies of the court, of the forests, the sacred forests of those times. Ever since, Roman women have done the same. They have not given themselves for love to young men, but always calculatingly for money to holders of important offices. The very empresses of medieval Rome fornicated with the enemy at the doors of Rome, and some of the besiegers of the city were killed in the arms of Venus. Sometimes those same queens, in order to get rid of the invaders, became their whores. In Rome, Eve's apple has always served some useful and prosaic end because Roman women are incurably greedy. They have beautiful faces, but everything else about them, including their large bottoms, is ugly. Their chief pre-occupation is food, from lupines to roast pork with fennel set on a table along the shores of the Lido or of Anzio, with the wines of Ariccia, Frascati, and Anzio.

The woman, after her husband had left, kept two lodgings, one small one for her children, one luxurious one for the English or American friend of the moment.

I know that every day at sunset she left her children either alone or with an obliging old neighbour. After a couple of hours in front of her mirror applying make-up, doing her hair, trying on a variety of fine underwear, and putting on a suit with an elegant velvet rose in the buttonhole, she would leave her house as her children wailed imploringly:

‘Mamma, we’re hungry. Hungry, Mamma!’

And they repeated in chorus: ‘Mamma, we’re hungry. Mamma, don’t forget to get a piece of bread from the Americans for us!’

The proud mother of the Gracchi often answered her infants’ pleadings and tears with slaps as she coldly took from their thin little fingers her eyebrow pencil or the perfumed lipstick which restored to a pair of pale lips the red of the flames of hell. She then went to the Canadian Club or to the Foyer du Pèlerin Français, or even with Negroes. How many of those chosen bacchantes have I seen climbing the steps of the Palazzo dell’ Esposizione together with peasant servant girls who fled only recently, like larks escaping from the hunter’s shot! They were pushed out from their happy native tracks to a city where, until a short time ago, prostitution had been as common as in all the other cities of the world, with the simple difference, however, that a veil stretched by the police on the one hand, and by the Vatican which was then severely prudish on the other, hid everything from the eyes of the devout.

The good Christians who, instead of shouting,

remained quiet during the outrage of the three hundred innocent martyrs of the Ardeatine caves never made any efficacious protest against the abuses and improprieties of foreign soldiers.

The evil little house where Linda practised her fine trade was entirely given up to this. I guessed which one it was from seeing soldiers go in and others come out, just as in a real bordello. But the English brand of puritanism was safe.

To avoid climbing stairs uselessly, I knocked at the first floor and asked:

‘Do you know someone named Linda?’

A young man who was obviously fit for work had come to the door. He was well fed and had the herculean appearance of all the young riff-raff, thieves and assassins in Rome. He stared at me, but he was taken in by the bland, innocent expression of a mendicant brother that I can turn on when I enter dangerous places. Either he had already seen me wandering about through some market place, or he had noticed me in the Piazza del Monte or at the Porta Portese; I don’t know. I do know, however, that I immediately thought that he knew who I was. Perhaps Linda had spoken to him about ‘a man, a certain painter, a writer’; however, she had exaggerated in her praise of me. As a matter of fact, young whores, those who don’t yet know what low level they have reached, those who would blush with surprise if they were to be told point-blank, ‘You have become a prostitute!’ have the best

memories of their most recent honest job and of their last master, so that they embroider upon their respective values.

I told the young rascal that I had come to look for Linda to give her some papers or ration books government messengers had brought by mistake to my address. At that he stopped looking at me sullenly and threateningly, and, giving me an ugly smile, treated me almost like a friend. In the meantime, a girl in her underwear had appeared behind his square shoulders. She had the eyes of a good-natured cocotte and two fresh cheeks like ripe apples which have not yet fallen from the tree. I had the feeling that they had the smell of a country attic lined with shelves filled with apples whose strong scent covered the faint odour of ammonium sulphate emanating from the grain. She also exhaled a certain musty smell of sweat, uncleanliness and greasy dishwater, to which Allied canned meats and beans had contributed. I understood what was going on. The girl frowned when she saw that I wasn't coming into her room, and went up to the second floor. Just as I was about to push the bell the door was opened, and a Negro soldier was thrown out by two large, gay girls. Neither of them was Linda. I proceeded to the third floor, where the first-floor scene was more or less repeated. On the fourth floor I found the unctuous little woman I have described earlier, who rubbed her hands like a mother superior and asked me for whom I was looking.

'I am Linda's former employer,' I said loudly, so that if Linda were there she could hear. But she was not. She did live here, but she had gone out. The madam believed that she had gone to a bar, the one at the end of the Via del Panico. I didn't need to know anything further, and started down the stairs. At that point, as though suddenly assailed by doubts, she tried to stop me to say something to me. I went into a few more details, but she already knew them all perfectly well. I gathered that she wanted to justify herself to me, that she wanted me to believe that she did not rent rooms by the hour but rented the room to Linda because she was a friend and wanted to oblige her. She went on to say that she had taken Linda in because she felt sorry for her and wanted to keep her from walking the streets. She said that in the black market beans cost a hundred and twenty lire a kilo, sugar six hundred, pork four hundred, lamb a little less, and oil two thousand lire a flask—all of which I knew, with the simple difference that I knew it for having heard it told, while she knew it as an old black-market customer.

She also wanted to explain that Linda was a spend-thrift and a slattern. In three days she had lost a comb which had cost three hundred lire and had broken another which had cost as much. Linda slept most of the day, from which I gathered that she stayed up most of the night, as is the habit of whores who turn night into day and day into night. Besides this, she was by

nature lazy, sly and a sleepy-head. She didn't like anything except her bed, where she wanted to stay alone during the day but never alone at night. Her flesh, like cheese, was flabby but white. Her breasts were like showy little altars trimmed with lace and flowered ribbons. She absent-mindedly would leave her gloves here, her umbrella there. One evening some soldiers had taken her out to enjoy her. When it came to paying her they had done worse than disappear: they had questioned her right to be paid. The argument had degenerated into brutality, and it ended with her being stripped of her clothing and left half naked by the soldiers, who took her little fur piece, her wool jacket, and even her shoes. It was night, and poor Linda spent a great many unpleasant minutes while she walked, barefooted and almost naked, along stony country lanes, possibly in the mocking moonlight or perhaps in the dull night. After a long time she came upon another group of soldiers in the Piazzale Flaminio, who covered her as best they could with blankets and took her home. One of them (what a difference there can be even among soldiers) wanted to prove his generosity and courtesy by making a present to her of his own shoes because he had two or three other pairs in his jeep. But Linda's foot is as small as her brain, and not only her feet and her brain but practically everything else about her is narrow and small—even her heart. At any rate, probably because the soldier did not speak Italian and consequently was interested in kisses and

love rather than in compliments, that evening he took it upon himself to become Florinda's protector. And, what might seem strange but is actually understandable, he had become her extremely jealous lover, beating her roundly and leaving the imprint of cleated boots on her white thighs, yet at the same time letting her rent rooms by the hour in the house run by the procuress where clearly Linda did not spend her time saying her prayers.

The madam surely did not suppose that I was paying any attention to her story of Florinda's jealous lover. The only fact that interested me was that the girl was not there. There were, however, four other little cocottes, including the madam's daughter as well as her son's wife. He had been given up for lost, because he was thought to be either a prisoner or an exile of the republic. Actually he was here in the same house betraying his wife while she betrayed him. She was a blonde with a sharp nose and amber eyes. Her breasts seemed swollen with milk, while actually they were as hard as ordinary cheese, well separated, arrogant, provoking and almost obscene. He was a handsome young man; but, looking into his eyes, I judged him to be fit for the gallows. However, I saw the girls who were young and tender, frisky, talkative and gay; then I changed my mind and understood why polygamy seemed almost reasonable. Bilateral polygamy, yes, but not the sort that involves standing by as one's own wife goes into the room next door and remains there for

two or three hours with an American soldier while, outside, one cannot help hearing the creak of the bed moving to and fro with clocklike regularity. The feeling of disgust and nausea that this engenders is common also to animals, even to those that are as lascivious as the spectacularly beautiful pheasants. A male pheasant will not tolerate the presence of another, even for a reciprocal exchange, while each one wants for himself as a rule at least three or four females; and if the pheasant is exceptionally handsome he wants as many as a dozen. The son, unconcerned, left his wife in charge of the Allies.

Linda confirmed this later in the bar where, with the directions given me, I easily found her. She was there together with seven or eight thieves and with a girl who had been married at sixteen and was a mother. Her child, naturally enough, had ended up in an orphanage. The girl told me all this with unbelievable cynicism as a result of my having flattered her by saying that she was beautiful and could have been a model for large paintings such as a new incarnation of Beatrice Cenci or could easily have taken the place of such-and-such a famous movie beauty. To show off she pushed back the curls which fell on her forehead and pirouetted on her heel to show me her round shoulders and narrow waist; but the waist was not very narrow, because, as I have said before, Roman women are not really beautiful except for their faces. Then, to explain either why

her hips were so wide or why her stomach, held back by an elastic girdle, was prominent, she repeated that although she was only sixteen she had already been married and that she was also a mother. Her husband had left her, so she had 'given herself to life,' making a present of her baby to a foundling hospital.

As for Linda, she seemed actually embarrassed at seeing me and ashamed of the condition in which I found her after so much time. Haughty and arrogant, she was irritated when I gave only ten lire as tip to the waiter who had served us three cups of dirty coffee-coloured water.

She began to nibble cream cakes with her small, feline teeth. I had warned her that I would not pay for them, and she, either for spite or to show me that she was no longer afraid of being short of money, began to eat two at the same time. Holding one in each hand, she consumed about a dozen. When the bill came, she paid it with two hundred-lire notes, and then dropped the matter. When she opened her purse I saw that it held more bills than I had ever had even in normal times, when I sold my paintings for ten thousand lire apiece and my etchings for five hundred. There were some of all colours, sizes, and quality. There were pink African and Italian five-hundred-lire notes and thousand-lire notes. There must have been about a hundred notes in all, some of them rolled up like sausages, others crumpled up like rags. What was I to do? Congratulate the new queen, this former house-

maid of mine, who became disgusted with me when I started to eat in public soup kitchens? There was no point in doing so, nor had I come for that purpose. And the bar stank of another time, the time when the thieves who threatened me and shook their fists at my poor nose came through this very door. I was afraid at first that the men present were those who had assaulted me once before. But fortunately, they were not; Pappa and his confederates were not there. I was convinced that I could entrust to Linda, with the certainty of a favourable outcome, the task of getting my bicycle back to me, provided I paid for it.

It was a question of ingratiating myself with Linda by my good manners. Women of her sort are almost all riff-raff, and even among the others I have never known, except for my mother, my grandmother, my sister Maria, my blessed Anita, anything but malicious women. This holds true even for the highest ranks. They all try to approach a man as the bee approaches a flower and the vineyardist a grape. They nibble, they want to see if the grape is worth eating, and if the man is worth devouring. There are various ways of doing this: his brain can be consumed, leaving an empty cranium; other parts of his body, too, can be eaten; but when there is no heart, no wallet, no brain, or anything else left, then he is of no further use to women. There have been in important places women who tried unsuccessfully to eat my brain; they liked me, but I

spurned them. Others attempted to consume my wallet and succeeded only in part, by blackmail, but never for money, because I have always had little truck with whores. And even the odious, greedy, cheating, ravishing Otero would never have been able to get either Empress Eugénie's necklace or fifteen lire from me, the most I have ever paid a harlot.

As for my heart, Anna Stickler, whom I made famous in my books, consumed it almost entirely, although she was a devil. I idealized her in my writings; I never told how once she left my house and fled through a first-floor window, to go to a military camp. (Anna was not Anita, and actually I have never loved anyone but the loyal Anita.) At first I considered the woman's action in the worst possible taste, but then I forgave her. As for my wife, she spied on me; it was she that told the Fascists of my correspondence with exiles; which resulted in my being sent to prison. This is the reason I obtained a legal separation from her. My blessed, loyal Anita is now my companion. It is difficult for a woman to respect and tolerate a man's genius. Ordinary women are incapable of reverence for a man of genius, and so are ordinary men. And finally at the end of our painful careers as artists and writers we realize the emptiness of everything. What is the reward of our effort? Nothing, except the solicitude of a loyal Anita. Better than all other meetings are the meetings with shepherdesses. This is the reason for the existence of Arcadia. The real Arcadians are those who

in their youth did as I did—not those who are emasculated, shackled, decorated, the academicians, the old, the cranks, the dwellers of the Parrasio woods, but Arcadians like me, those who don't know that they are, the real Arcadians, with Virgil and Horace, whom I have always liked the most, at their head.

It had become more and more essential that I appeal to Linda by my good manners, not because I had thrown her out of my studio when she began to go with soldiers—as a matter of fact, treating women roughly often endears one to them—but because from now on Linda was no longer a woman. She was a wanton whore, one of those who insult easily and count minutes. They don't want to waste time with men who don't pay, and like only those who do pay. They have daily needs and must earn a certain amount per day. Because of this they are somewhat like men who act only in their own interest, and it is for their interest that vulgar friends exist. There are very few who are not vulgar.

Friendship no longer exists. I too have tried to have friends. The least that a vulgar friend asks is an exaggerated praise of his abilities, which are almost always limited; yet he insists that you praise him for everything, and that you repeat the same praises to him three times a day. Not only that, but he insists that you tell everyone about it. The first time he comes to you, his hat in hand. He displays a profound courtesy. He

has, or believes he has, studied your weakness. He has read your ideas in your books and throws them back at you. And so, from the very start of the friendship he begins to irritate you. (However, I have ten intelligent friends in Rome who are an exception to this rule.) Then if he sees that you stand up against the world, that you are the man whom everyone fears and avoids, who considers it as his first duty, his right, to speak unpleasant truths, who always sees things before anyone else; a man whose boat sails only in a sea of troubles even though it does not sink, then invariably the common friend, the fake, the bore, leaves you. I knew one once who kept bothering me by making me read his scripts. He was always with me. I found him wherever I went. I have never had a schedule of my time, and I don't know when I write nor where; but he did. Well, when I was beaten up for the first time in 1928 by my enemies, whose number was out of all proportion to a man who stood alone, he left me and behaved like St. Peter. He pretended never to have known me. Then, after twenty-seven days spent in bed because of the wounds I had suffered, he chose the hour of midnight to get back the last of his movie scripts the reading of which he had inflicted upon me two months before by his constant begging that I read, correct, praise, exaggerate the worth of the scenario, present it to certain movie magnates, recommend it to producers and make them like it. And he did not come in person: he sent a messenger.

Later, when everyone had abandoned me, I let him know that I needed his help because I was penniless. Let me make myself clear: I have never asked money from any friend. All he had to do was go to the bank with my authorization to collect my wages. But he wouldn't go himself, nor would he send his messenger. Then I wiped my bottom with his script and, fragrant as it then was, I returned it to him. Since then I have never wanted more than a few friends and have abandoned all those who have attempted to return into my good graces whenever, like a ship which has managed to weather a storm, I have been able to make port again.

'To come back to Linda, I had never in the past done more than caress and tease her. The caresses were forgotten; the teasing was a memory untinged with bitterness. I knew that I meant nothing to her, and that she filled me with distaste. However, I did the best I could and told her that I was well, that my affairs were humming, and that I had bought a gold ring with the proceeds of the sale of one of my paintings. It wasn't true, because Americans don't buy works of art.

'Oh, how much did it cost? Let's see it! Let me have it. Take it off your finger!'

But I did not take it off—not because I was shy, but because if I had she would have noticed that it was not real gold. I showed it to her from a distance.

'Do you see how beautiful it is? It cost the price of a

painting: a beautiful painting which I sold to an American!

'Oh, good for you! You too are dealing with the Americans!'

'Yes, I too am selling my junk!' I replied jokingly 'But you've got a ring, too. Let's see yours!'

'Mine? Mine is very precious. A Canadian who was dead drunk gave it to me the other night.'

'I'll bet it isn't real.'

'Not real?' Linda furiously shook her hand and, as though I had pulled out a Cellini-like stiletto, drew back while she involuntarily covered the ring with her other hand. Then, frowning, she made a defensive gesture and, with eyes that are normally troubled but which become brilliant as diamonds when a devilish fury possesses her, she stared at her ring. The suspicion of having really been made a fool of by the Canadian had gripped her. She then said:

'I wonder if he deceived me? He was dead drunk!'

As if to say: It is possible for a drunkard to lie, and the old adage 'In vino veritas' means nothing more than that a drunkard because of his state of drunkenness cannot tell lies any more. Does it not mean, contrary to the common belief, that wine does not clear the head, that it does not awaken generous instincts—simply, that it is perfidious and renders the most dangerous of all services that can be rendered to common men: it forces them to tell what they think? But in order to find out what a man thinks, are good

manners or the rack needed as well as a great many glasses of wine? Is truth uncovered by astuteness, force or courtesy? And the worst is when nothing can extract the truth from a person, neither good nor bad manners, nor wine, nor the rack, because the head is empty and the most wine can do is fill it with its gay fumes. And since almost all human heads are empty (although they are full of memories and casual misdeeds or rancours and hatreds), it is wasted work to try to force men to reveal what does not exist in their souls, their hearts, or their brains, since they don't think, but only half-think or act. As for their stupid actions, they themselves refer to them as swindles.

In the Canadian, however, there was a craftiness which is quite different from intelligence. Intelligence is cordial, courteous; it is a light, a flash that occasionally illumines the night of the senses. Craftiness is like pork fat, an oil that lubricates the members; it is paradoxically foolishness, which at its height is thought to be the opposite of what it really is. So the Canadian was crafty, pretending to be drunker than he was and giving Linda, in lieu of payment, a worthless ring, which may not have been one of those made of papier-mâché, dipped in gilt (Neapolitan purpurin) and sold as gold rings; but it was a worthless ring nevertheless.

It was obvious from its weight and from the quality of the onyx, a pale stone striped with white, that it was a fake. Real onyx is the colour of water into which a

few drops of whisky have been poured. Imitation onyx is coloured artificially. The simplest way to tell real gold from imitation gold is to scratch it a little. Besides, there is the usual mark.

The lecture on the quality of black onyx, striated with white or red or some other colour, had impressed Linda, which was just what I needed, because even a fifteen-year-old knows that a whore's first love is jewellery, whether real or imitation. As a general rule, harlots follow the example set by their leader, the beautiful Otero, who danced covered with fake rings while the good ones were left at home in the care of two private policemen, who guarded the safe which contained not only Eugénie's necklace, but those of two other queens as well, all their queenliness thus ending up with a beautiful, intelligent whore.

Linda was now saying: 'It is possible? Look here, you always come and upset me. You're a devil. You're everywhere. Why did you come? Why do you want to make me doubt? I got the ring last night from a Canadian—no, from a nice Sicilian. No, there were two soldiers, and I don't remember which of the two I took it from to make him give it to me.'

'See? I'll show you at once,' I replied. 'Take it off! And let's see if it's made of gold. Let's scratch it against the wall!' I should have continued my lecture on precious stones and on real gold if Linda had not begged me to keep quiet in front of her friend.

'Let's look at it outside the bar,' she whispered in my ear.

To speak to her alone was precisely what I wanted. She left the bar with me, asking her friend to wait a moment. She had learned to say 'moment' in the same way that the Americans and before them the Germans said it. The Germans were naturally the first to make 'moment' fashionable, but with the same rhythm, in the midst of the same hunger, the Americans continued. 'Wait a moment,' you poor Italian men and women, and you will have no more tears to weep.

But let us leave this scabrous subject and return to Linda. Having taken her aside, I suggested to her that she put me in contact with the thieves so that I might recover my speedy aluminium bicycle, naturally paying in full for it. I was ashamed to have to tell her that I had been robbed by her colleagues, by the frequenters of this bar. Until now she had believed that I had a certain amount of cunning. She believed that I was more cunning than she, at the same time knowing how to look simple-minded and meek, so as to avoid trouble.

I consider that the choice for a man like me is limited, as is that of the poet. We are knocked about more or less by everyone; not knocked down or led to the gallows, but driven to ruination, perdition, even if only to the loss of material existence, roasted slowly,

like St. Lawrence. I don't know if his executioners were men of letters, artists, all fakes, like those eight thousand who receive money, subsidies, legal protection, outrageous prices, academic honours, from Pavolini or from Bottai, or whether they were executioners like mine, political men, scoundrels who were afraid that I would take their place (I, who loathe politics!), that I would make an impression upon the people. As for men of letters, they have always feared me for two reasons: first, that I would uncover their little hypocrisies and would undo their jesuitic intrigues; secondly, my talent: artists have recognized only my etchings as being good. Actually this means a good deal to me because I am more interested in a drawing of Antonio Pollaiuolo, for example, than in one of his sculptures; more in a drawing or an etching of Goya's than in one of his paintings; more in an aquarelle of Rembrandt's than in one of his oils; and as for Millet, ten times more in a drawing than in a painting. This holds true for an infinity of others, especially Raphael. But elevated tastes such as these belong to Baudelaire and to me, and are not shared by others. Most people want a large painting. Artists have always praised my etchings and never my paintings, for the ridiculous reason that, not being etchers themselves, they have little to fear from my success in that field, while as a painter they consider me a dangerous winner of prizes, who has become a favourite with private collectors. But, putting all this aside, the most

natural thing in the world is for a man like me to have countless enemies in many camps; enemies who, taken one by one, carry little weight, but, massed together, form an oppressive burden upon my shoulders.

And so I am limited to the choice of either knocking my opponents down, as Caravaggio and Benvenuto Cellini used to do, or leaving them alone. In order to avoid being like either the one or the other, I leave them alone. But my choice is still to, avoid as many blows as possible, while giving as much annoyance as possible. My aim is to effect the only purge necessary, the purge of the idiotic editors of the third page of the various *Giornale d'Italia*.

In the meantime it seems impossible that my pen should cause so much annoyance to everyone, that writers should be so anxious to avoid me and keep me away from certain editors, that artists should be so anxious to keep me away from the Fascist collectors who despoiled the Jews, then said to have been liquidated, 'discriminated against.' These collectors have now become Communists so that they may continue to be on the side of the majority and thus acquire cheaply paintings whose value they will afterwards exaggerate in some low-grade publication, saying nothing about the method of acquisition nor their subsequent exchange for American coffee.

But we were talking about Linda. At the time that

she frequented my studio, she was aware of my struggles and my anxieties. She knew, just by overhearing telephone conversations, that I was a man of many enemies. She understood intuitively that the man who is strong, even though he is beginning to succumb, is the one who has a great many enemies. For the rest, my simple mode of life and dislike of patronage were attributes which made her believe that I was at least astute and frank, like the dove and the serpent in the parable.

I was sorry, therefore, that with her knowledge that I had once been so clever and nimble that not even the thieves of Rome had beaten me when they stole my dog Liebe, or my second and third bicycle—it had become necessary for her to change her attitude and look upon me as a simpleton, classed with those who allow their bicycles to be taken away from them and don't know where to find them. However, I took courage. I told her that since her departure and the birth of Lucianella, I had been forced to become a servant because Anita was already overworked by feeding the baby, doing all the laundry, cleaning the house, queuing up for soups in public kitchens.

'What?' she interrupted. 'You now have to go for soups? Why, a little while ago you told me that everything was different, and that you were getting along quite well!'

'I could hardly tell you in front of your friend that your previous employer was going from bad to worse!'

'I see,' she replied. 'Then tell me what you want me to do!'

Women, if approached in that way, become magnanimous. They, who are so mean with everyone and especially with their lovers, become kind and pleasant when there is a chance of doing a favour, for a former employer, or when they can help a person whom they like. Then they put what they own into a common pool. They make two parts of all their possessions and give one part away, so that they can be thought generous. Or perhaps they do it in order to help those who are unfortunate, because it is only the fortunate, the rich, who are truly hated. The price of being wealthy is high while the wealth itself is discounted. The rich obtain everything apparently with money, and nothing with love. Nothing with love, not even holy oil! This is their condemnation.

Of the girls who had once done me favours, I now remembered Maurina, who, when times were bad for us, gave us a few pieces of bread. She went with the Germans, but she always came back with some bread. And she kept nothing for herself, or almost nothing. I remember that once, after the exodus of the Germans from Rome, we went to an abandoned German encampment, near the Madonna del Riposo not far from the church of Sant' Onofrio, famous and dear to me because of Tasso's tomb. There is a pleasant walk at twilight among the almond trees in flower along the

railway torn by German bombs, along the great bridges, the fields and the marshes of the Val d'Inferno. She found in a cache in the abandoned encampment a wooden crate which had not been touched, full of dehydrated potatoes. We joyfully carried away a small amount for each of us. When we were home, Maurina wanted to give them all to us.

So, before speaking ill of harlots, one should think twice and ask oneself if they too are not creatures of God. As a matter of fact, I never knew a girl who was sweeter-tempered than Maurina. She was always happy, even during times of misfortune aggravated by hunger, or of hunger aggravated by the perils of war. Even Linda now showed herself to be kind and pleasant. I told her about my bicycle. She laughed and exclaimed:

'You see, you who are so clever? You, who always scolded me for so many trifles? You who speak so badly of me? And yet I too have my uses. I too can be good for something!'

When she paused to reflect, I asked:

'But tell me, what shall I do? It's up to you to tell me.'

She suggested: 'Wait a moment, I'll have to consult my companion. She's the one who knows all the thieves of the Via Panico.'

She went away and came back gaily, accompanied by the sixteen-year-old mother and abandoned wife.

This girl was born in the Panico and had lived there.

And yet she knew nothing about Giulia Farnese, the naked sixteen-year-old friend of Lucretia Borgia. Nor did she know anything about Monte Giordano, where Lucretia's old father used to go with her brother to caress her shoulders while the procuress-wife of a protonotary or a Vatican librarian, I think, helped the old man make love to the Farnese girl. .

'Oh Lord, could it be Alberto?' asked the girl.

I told my tale at length, telling her of the bicycle theft, trying my best to blame the thieves as little as possible and to put it all on present circumstances. When she said 'Alberto' I felt as though I were at the gates of heaven. However, I still had to find out whether Alberto's name was also Pappa. I asked her what 'Alberto's surname was, but she became suspicious and realized that she had made a mistake in naming him. She caught herself and said:

'Oh, no, no! It could not have been Alberto! However, listen to this.'

She said 'listen' in the same courteous manner as that used at the time of Starace.

'Listen,' she repeated. 'I think I can help you, but you will have to spend some money.'

At sixteen, then, she already knew all evils, including that of blackmail to draw attention away from a theft by paying. She repeated:

'I know a great many people in the Via Panico, and I can ask them. But you, can you be trusted? You look as though you could.'

Smiling in such a gently friendly and courteous manner, she looked like a baroness in a drawing-room. Turning to Linda, she said:

‘Your employer, your what-do-you-call him, can he be trusted?’

Linda, drawing her lips into a tight line, sticking out her chin, replied ‘Yes’ immediately. ‘I will answer for him,’ she added in a loud voice.

‘So,’ the other girl said, ‘what will you give to whoever returns your bicycle?’

‘To you a kiss,’ I said.

She stamped her feet, wiggled her hips, half closed her pretty eyes, but replied that she wasn’t interested in a kiss at the moment, although she would have given it to me without making me pay for it had we not been in the middle of the street. ‘But the fact is,’ she said, pointing to the young men in the Via del Panico, ‘kisses don’t count much with them.’ She continued: ‘Neither do I. And in order to find your bicycle I shall have to turn to my mother. She is old and knows a great many other old women in this street. She’s very clever, my mother. But,’ she repeated, ‘how much are you prepared to pay? Don’t forget that nowadays bicycles represent capital! How much did you pay for it?’

I hesitated to tell, because I had bought it when bicycles cost very little, and she said, to anticipate my offer:

‘Will you pay ten thousand lire? They may not give it back to you for less.’

I could not tell this girl whom I had known for just a few minutes that I was poor, and that I had become poor as a result of the war. Because wars do what they always have done: they make some people rich, generally those who used to be poor, impoverish those who were well-to-do, and reduce to beggary those who do not speculate for a living. For the pious, wars represent basically the expiation of their *laissez-faire* policy, for letting the human beast alone and not saying to the world, 'Don't go to war!' I have always maintained that it is the duty of men of letters to tell this to mankind. And since almost all of us have always failed in this duty, there is really nothing to do but beat our breasts and recognize the fact that, if wars continue to come, the blame rests essentially with us and not with those who were incapable of seeing things before the others. It is the fault of those who, although they can see the clock which is known as history, do not try to avoid the war. History is nothing more nor less than a clock. One can be sure that after five o'clock will come six o'clock, and not four o'clock. On the other hand, it is so easy and so convenient that it looks like a mere venial sin, to do as certain poets, writers, or philosophers who speculate in a vacuum have done. They walk in the clouds and don't notice, or won't, that down below in the terrestrial flower beds worms and bugs swarm, and that low instincts lustily reappear at every hour of the clock of history. And so long as one considers that the evil roots of wars cannot be

extirpated, one must winnow and preserve as much as possible. This, at least, is my belief. I believe that the only good I can do my neighbour is to make him damn all wars, and teach him to give himself with all his soul and all the means possible to the task of uprooting the evil causes of these wars. Wars are caused by voracity, by the folly of deeming it better to live by the misfortunes of others than by one's own blessings, and that it is better to harm one's neighbour than to help him. However, I think that if everyone were well off, then everyone could be even better off. To those patriots who say that they fight not for themselves but for their children, to create better conditions of life for them, let me make the following observation: Begin by being well off yourselves! Then it will be easy for your children to be even better off! Provide your little house, your little acres of land, with a vegetable garden. Dig it up by your own hard work, and after your death your children will not find, as they are finding now, houses devastated by bombs, or despoiled by soldiers or rifled by thieves, who, born in a dungheap, cannot feed on anything else. That is what wars do: they generate thieves and murderers in numbers infinitely greater than in time of peace and tranquillity.

Because it was our fault, the fault of poets, if wars occurred and thieves and murderers were multiplied, because instead of standing around uselessly we should have known how to stop them, we should have censured perversity and discouraged thieves and murderers,

I was disposed to pay for my bicycle a second time, to atone for my fault as a poet. And so I offered to pay up to five thousand lire, half of what the girl had suggested. There was of course still the matter of finding the bicycle. But this was not the moment to plead or to enter into lengthy negotiations with thieves, both of which would have put the girl in a bad humour and quite rightly made her suspicious of my intentions, which were to find the thief in order to take action against him.

I girded myself and told her briefly that I knew the name of the young villain who had stolen my bicycle.

'And how do you know it?' she said, with more suspicion than curiosity.

I intimated that someone had pointed out to me that Pappa had been seen with my aluminium bicycle in the Via del Panico. I added that I knew Pappa intended to sell it and had offered it to a bicycle vendor.

'Pappa?' asked the girl. 'I don't know if Alberto's last name is Pappa. I do know that it could have been him. I know him.'

She said, 'I know him,' but because of the usual united front presented by the inhabitants of the Via del Panico she had added no particular that might be ascribed to Pappa, a man who had already been condemned for thefts and robberies several times. She merely let it be vaguely understood. As a matter of fact, I read it in her eyes when she winked at Linda, repeating Pappa's surname.

'All right,' she said. 'And now what shall we do? Listen: I'll tell my mother about it, and she will try to convince Alberto'—thus making it clear to me that Alberto was actually Pappa. 'But what about the five thousand lire? I can't lend them to you!'

'You are always broke!' interposed Linda, turning to her companion. She spoke like a mistress scolding a pupil, forgetting that she herself had once been the other's pupil, or that it had been she who had shown the girl how to be well paid by the Americans. But the sixteen-year-old was still making love, while Linda no longer did. Linda pocketed the money and thought nothing of caresses.

'Let's do it this way,' proposed Linda, pointing to me. 'I know him. He's a painter. He was my employer' once, as I have often told you. He owns a handsome studio and a beautiful house. He says that he is poor, but it isn't true. And I can easily lend him five thousand lire. Let's do it this way. If through your mother you succeed in getting the bicycle, I'll lend the five thousand lire because I am sure that I'll get them back from him!' she said triumphantly. She added, turning to me: 'As a matter of fact, you'll give me back six thousand. But be careful because, if you don't give me six thousand within two weeks, either I won't send the bicycle or I'll ask seven thousand lire!'

Linda was joking. She was perfectly capable of anything, including money-lending, for she nourished within her small brain the instinct of becoming rich,

but she had no thought of playing the usurer with me. Daughter of a Calabrian butcher, she need not have become a street-walker at all. After the exodus of the Germans, she could have returned home. Instead she had decided to grow rich in order to return to Calabria and—who knows?—to marry; to set up a large butcher's shop and to strangle chickens for the rest of her life, trying only to become rich. One can become rich by violence and evil, but certainly not with etchings and poetry! I have never known how to gauge accurately Linda's practical capacities. She is now completely loveless. Her very lust is no longer dominated by an excess, an exuberance of amatory instincts that are on the point of exploding, but only by the desire to earn a great deal of money by offering a great deal of flesh. Maurina is not like that. Maurina is a fire; she always wants to give herself with pleasure. It is voluptuousness that makes her throw herself into the arms of others; but Linda is calculating. Love means nothing to her. She sells her white cheese-like flesh to be toyed with by soldiers. The pleasure she derives from it is relative, but her instinct, her desire to be a parasite, is absolute. As a species, she is like a leech; she sucks blood and money. She does a few good deeds, so long as these do not set her back and so long as the good deed serves some other purpose as well—if nothing else, the ambition to be in some way looked upon as clever and good.

'Well, what shall we do?' I repeated.

'Don't worry, I'll telephone,' she replied, sure that the bicycle would reappear and that I would pay the six thousand lire of which one thousand were to be for her.

Towards noon the Via del Panico is full of the coming and going of young women who go to the public kitchens for soup and of girls who are proud of what is done in the bordellos of the Via del Tritone. Girls wrapped in furs, their black, naturally curly hair done up by hairdressers, not of the Via Panico (where there aren't any) but of the Via Tomacelli, the Via Veneto, the Via del Tritone, can be seen coming out of miserable little doorways. It is these women from the Via Tritone that around noon feel the need of putting their agile and well stockinged feet on the broken-down steep brick stairs of their little hovels for at least a quarter of an hour. They bring back, under their furs, presents from the Americans together with things that have been stolen from them. One girl brings a cake of fine English soap to her old mother. At first she waves it through the air with the gaiety of a child; then she takes on the grave air of the noble wives of Roman prætors or concubines in the poetry of Horace, or satires of Suetonius. Young men who have come, running, make way for the fortunate prostitutes, their childhood companions, who shared their first thefts, their first prison terms, their first hospitalizations, their first court-rooms. In the meantime, old men, thieves

who are no longer able to steal because they are too weak, warm their hands at the hot coals on braziers where chestnuts are being roasted. Others manage to collect enough turkey feathers which are now unbuyable in the markets, to make expensive fans. The black market thrives publicly in the Via del Panico. After all, the poor also must eat! Their tricks and wiles to get enough to eat are endless.

The Via del Panico goes down towards the human sewer which opens out on the Ponte Sant' Angelo, a bridge of ethereal flying statues designed by Bernini and executed by his pupils. When the sewer rises above its level (as it did when the assistant director of the Regina prisons was thrown into the Tiber) and reaches the height of the bridge, then all will be over for the righteous and mighty bourgeois of Rome. And so will it be for the decent men of Rome, for in the Via del Panico subtle arguments will no longer be effective.

I passed a few anxious days waiting for Linda's telephone call. I consider the joy of finding a lost object greater than the possession of that object before its loss. Printers, bores, or people who had the wrong number telephoned to me during those days. I had already begun to think of something else, but every once in a while the hope that the bicycle would be found came surging back. My troubles were numerous and similar to those of so many other citizens; and they came one after another. One had hardly been remedied when the

threatening outlines of two others were already before us. Hunger grew from day to day. We believed and still believe that we may be able to escape the sad fate of Count Ugolino. But hunger is like this. It is as though one were gradually freezing in the bottom of a valley between high mountains which are threatening and cloudy, and through whose hovering black clouds impenetrable, frightening, ghostly summits of ice appear. Although an occasional melancholy ray of sun shines upon these summits (for me this is the look in the eyes of my little daughter Lucianella) night has already fallen in the bottom of the valley. The hope of escape during this war grows dimmer from day to day. Our evil presentiment of death, of misery and hunger could increase daily, but doesn't, because hunger is like a gradual dying of cold. We hear little or nothing, and hardly feel the presence of our organs any more; numbed as we are, the very urge to eat diminishes, and it is difficult to remember that we once ate roast pheasant, tasted fluffy omelettes, enjoyed some pastry or cream at the end of a meal, or disdained tender red anchovies which were the only choice of hors d'œuvre. Whoever is very hungry is no longer hungry. Hunger destroys itself. We have not yet arrived at this point; but winter is approaching, and hunger, and more than hunger, fasts, repeated fasts, intensified month after month, have become so frequent that they make us lose our sense of taste. I say, 'roast pheasant,' 'macaroni with mussels, with fresh, red tomato sauce,' and 'fancy

macaroni,' but I cannot remember what they are. Honest people like us have lost even the memory of the sense of taste.

However, despite all this, when on the third day the telephone rang and I heard Linda's voice, I felt as though I were coming to life again, as though I were coming unexpectedly out of a world of grief. Linda was telephoning to say that Pappa, with the agreement that he would receive five thousand lire, had returned the bicycle. Shortly after, Linda's friend was knocking at my studio door. She had my bicycle with her and a little bouquet of roses tied to the handlebar. I was tempted then and there not to pay the six thousand lire; as a matter of fact I paid only five thousand, adding, as a present for Linda, a small silver ring.

I did not want to know if Pappa had made objections or if he had immediately consented to the restitution, or rather to the blackmail. There was too much to make me indignant with myself for the importance I had attributed to the recovery of my bicycle. But I repeat, there is no more subtle pleasure than that of finding a lost or stolen object. From all this, one can conclude that if in normal times one is looking for amusing distractions, the following might prove to be pleasant: Let someone steal some precious object; steal it, be it understood, as a joke, but without letting on that it is a joke. Then let the person who was robbed run around as much as I have in search of my bicycle. For the rest, the joys that can be sought out in the world in normal

times are not of greater importance, nor of a different kind.

Life consists in looking for what has been lost. It can be found once, twice, three times, as I twice have succeeded in finding my bicycle. But a third time will come, and I shall find nothing. It is like this with all existence, which is like a race through and over obstacles, only to be lost in the end; a race that starts the moment of birth when the infant leaves the womb, weeping for the protection that has been lost. The suckling infant, his eyes shut tight, whimpers as he nuzzles his mother's breast with his rose-petal-coloured nose, searching for the sweet, straight nipple. Later, when he is weaned, he grasps his father's hand to help his first steps. Too many things are sought before dying, but before I die I shall certainly look for a friendly face. If I find it at all it will be Luciana's; and that, in my last days of grief, will be like dying with a light before me.